



烙印の紋章Ⅶ
愚者たちの挽歌よ、竜に届け

杉原智則

電撃文庫

Ⓜ

590

烙印の紋章Ⅶ

愚者たちの挽歌よ、竜に届け

杉原智則
イラスト ● 3

らくいん もんしょう
烙印の紋章Ⅶ

ぐしゃ ぼんか りゅう とど
愚者たちの挽歌よ、竜に届け

婚約者である皇太子ギルを亡くし失意のビリーナだったが、その死の真相を探るため帝都ソロンを発つ。ホウ・ランとも再会し、二人は再びアプター砦へ赴くことになる。

一方、ガルダ打倒を果たしたオルバはタワーリアへと凱旋。東の間の平穏を享受する。しかし、そんな折にメフィウスによるタワーリア電撃侵攻の報が入る。

ゲールの独裁がますます強まる状況のなか、ノウエ&ゼノンやイネーリなどの面々も次の一手への布石を打つ。

新たな戦乱の到来とともに、オルバとビリーナの運命も再び交差する。英雄への道を描くファンタジー戦記、第7弾！



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英雄への道を描くファンタジー戦記、第7弾！

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すぎはら ともり
杉原智則

3月生まれ。鹿児島県出身。最近の癒しはなぜかレトロゲーム。本作執筆中はスーファミのマジックソードなどに興じてました。2Dゲームもまだまだ捨てがたいな。

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烙印の紋章VII

愚者たちの挽歌よ、竜に届け

杉原智則


イラスト●3

しばらくのあいだ、ソロンを留守にすることをお許しいただきたいのです。

ガーベラ国第三王女

ビリーナ・アウエル





翼を、彼女は取り戻せたらうか。

西方の英雄 **オルバ**

卓越した竜丁 **ホウ・ラン**

ゴウエン。わたしにも多少の『見立て』はできる。



英雄を迎えるのに、なんのおもてなしもないが。

タワーリアの將軍

ボーワン・テドス



タウーリアの姫
エスメナ・バズガン

あの方と、ふたりきりにさせてくださいな。



すべてはわたしが取り仕切り、終わらせてごらんに入れましょう。

メフィウス軍人
ナバル・メツティ



大陸中央部



Prologue

The Black Tower that dominated the heart of Solon, imperial capital of Mephius, was bathed in moonlight.

There was no sign of human life in its underground. Up until a few days ago, there had been a great many people working there even in the middle of the night, but now that the Dragon Gods' shrine had finished being transferred, there was no one to be seen.

The ceremony for the unveiling of this new temple, which the shrine had been moved to, would be held in two days. As for this place, it had once been the crypt into which the imperial family stepped with reverence and awe to hold each of their rituals, but now there was only emptiness between the stone walls, and there was nothing but rubble scattered around.

Part of the ceiling had been removed during the works, which was why light was shining through. In this space where there was not a single person, nor even a single sound, only the pale, gentle moonlight remained to console the former sanctuary.

That was when –

Someone's footsteps echoed in the underground room which had been as silent and still as death.

Taking one step, then another, wrapped in a thick cloak with the hood hiding their face, a form appeared beneath the moonlight. Judging from their figure, it was probably a woman.

Weaving her way around the piles of debris, the woman stopped at a point which had once been decorated with a mural of the Dragon God Mephius and softly stretched out her hand. She looked like a devout believer mourning over the vestiges of the sanctuary, or perhaps she was a highborn lady come for a

scandalous tryst with a man.

There came the sound of more footsteps.

When the woman turned around, the figure of a man drifted into sight under the moonlight.

An elderly man with dark skin, clad only in a dull cloth that was wound from his shoulder to his waist. Rolling his goggling eyes that almost seemed about to start out of his head, he approached the woman. His mouth gaped open, and frothy drool clung to the edge of his lips.

A young woman should normally have feared for her safety, but this woman bent her knees and gave a deep curtsy full of reverence, as though she were before royalty.

“I am deeply grateful for the trouble you have taken in coming here.”

If any third person had been present, peeping at the scene, their eyes would surely have started from their heads in astonishment.

The woman’s voice was a familiar sound in the palace at Solon, and while her presence in this place was already unusual, her attitude towards the old man was another anomaly.

The old man revealed in the moonlight was called Wu On, and he was one of the elders.

These elders were Zerdians who had originally dwelt in the mountains west of Mephius, worshipping the dragon gods since long ago, and passing down their faith from generation to generation. When Mephius was first founded, the Dragon Gods faith was the state religion and the ancestors of these elders were granted the position of priests, but then an emperor, many generations ago, had abruptly changed the myths. “The Founding King did not receive power from the Dragon God Mephius but inherited the very blood of Mephius,” he said. In other words, all of Mephius’ emperors were descended from a dragon god. He declared that to serve and obey the emperor was to honour the dragon gods, and thus there was no longer any meaning to following musty beliefs and customs.

It had coincided with the time when the elders were starting to wield real

power over Mephian politics. It was a diplomatic way of expelling them; however, not long after, famine had swept through Mephius and that same emperor had died of illness. His successors continued to distance themselves from the Dragon Gods' faith; but, fearing curses and divine punishment, they had regularly invited the elders to important ceremonies and had left the performing of rituals to them.

Several months ago, however, the situation had once again started to change and several of the elders had come to live permanently in Solon. The one behind that was, needless to say, Emperor Guhl Mephius. Having suddenly decided to build a temple to the dragon gods, Guhl had invited the elders to ask their opinion on everything about it, including style, craftsmanship and the minute details of the layout.

He probably intends to gradually appoint the elders to all the important positions in the temple – was how most of the retainers assessed the situation. After all, for some reason, Guhl had been renewing and intensifying his relationship with the elders over these past few years.

Wu On was one of those elders, and he too had frequently been present during the construction of the temple.

"You said that you wanted to try my 'divinations'?" the elder spoke without a word of greeting.

Her head still bowed, the woman nodded slightly in assent.

"I have heard that Master Wu On's 'divinations' are the most accurate of all."

"Then stand."

The woman stood, as she had been told, and reached for the hem of her cloak. Her pale skin seemed to glow like white satin. She lifted up her clothes at the same time as her cloak, exposing her abdomen bare. Without warning, the old man squatted down, and seemed to cling to the woman's feet.

The woman's chin instantly jerked up. Stretching out his tongue, the old man started licking her naked skin.

For a short while, an obscene atmosphere flowed through the underground room that was bathed in moonlight.

The old man's face slowly traced upwards until coming to a sudden stop when it reached the woman's belly. Unbecoming of her dainty figure, her stomach was strangely protruding.

The old man brought his face towards it and almost lovingly rubbed his cheeks against it.

"Ooh, ohh ooohhh," the old man seemed to croon, his eyes shining with a lust that contradicted his age, "it breathes. Even in the womb, it feels my presence, it answers my call. Just as Sage Samara saw, it is undoubtedly a boy. A boy who will carry Mephius."

"Truly... Is that truly so?"

The woman's voice was husky. Was it disgust or joy that caused the gold curls tumbling from beneath her hood to shake so incessantly?

"This is all because you moved the course of events in accordance with our guidance. This time too, all will be well, will it not?"

"Yes. There will be no delay."

"In that case, there will be no problem for the young lord's future. Although..."

"Although?"

Wu On changed the angle of his face slightly and the woman once more curved her neck with a shuddering gasp.

"This is undeniable the vessel of a king, but the shadow of turmoil coils around him. Well, there's no need for excessive concern. Ascending the steps to the throne is never a smooth process. But..."

Once again, the old man interrupted his own words. Moving his head back, he looked up towards the woman. There was no longer any desire in his eyes. Instead, they resembled the goggling, squirming eyes of a reptile, so empty of expression it made you want to shiver.

"There is one among them who casts a particularly deep shadow over the throne."

"W-Who? Who is it?" the woman asked in a rush.

“A young girl,” the old man concluded briefly. “Very near, at that. As for how great the threat is... I cannot tell exactly until the time comes. If it risks becoming a hindrance, then removing her before it’s too late is one way of dealing with things.”

The old man licked his lips once then suddenly tumbled backwards as though he had lost all strength. His back shook as he began coughing violently. His body quivered with what looked like the backlash from having performed his ‘divination’, but the woman did not spare him a glance as she looked up at the moon that was once more shining from beyond the ceiling.

In those eyes that reflected that gently light, there flickered an unmistakably intense hatred.

Chapter 1: Mephius' Melancholy

Part 1

It was about five years since the previous empress, Lana, had died of illness. Usually, the elders of the Dragon Gods' faith would attend to the funerals of the imperial family, however, Emperor Guhl Mephius did not invite them to Solon on that occasion. The war with Garbera was at its height, which was partly why there was no state funeral and the inhabitants of Solon merely wore mourning clothes for a week, while Guhl himself immediately went back to commanding the army.

None of which was particularly surprising. Empress Lana was not familiar with those kinds of ancient Mephian traditions, and Guhl was not by nature inclined to respect history and customs.

And yet...

Since about three years ago, he had been changing. At the time, the war had been dragging on with no end in sight, and the border areas were constantly being taken and retaken. To bolster the people's fighting spirit, Guhl had sworn an oracle at the Dragon Gods' shrine: "Until the head of the Garberan king is presented before me, I will never sheathe my sword."

At the time of that ceremony, Guhl was, for some reason, unusually particular about observing old traditions. He invited the elders a month before the oracle and confirmed the procedure with them, he collected history books and old tomes while immersing himself in reading them, and he seemed to be going around in a general frenzy to ensure that not a single thing would go wrong during the ritual. And thus, so it was said, it was at this time that the once-

estranged Emperor and elders grew closer.

Which brings us to the present.

A building which seemed to symbolise the relationship between the Emperor and the Dragon Gods' faith had been erected in Solon: an imposingly large temple which was not to be outmatched by any in the western lands of Tauran, where the Dragon gods' faith was still deeply-rooted and permeated the lives of the people.

That day, a commemoration ceremony for the building of the temple was to be held from the early morning onwards. Only nobles and officers were in attendance. Since the previous evening, soldiers armed with spears and guns had been surrounding the perimeter of the temple at a circumference of several kilometres, so that not only could commoners not enter the building, they could not even watch the proceedings.

Exquisitely carved pillars ran from the entranceway to the interior part of the shrine; while in front of them, on either side of the long staircase, Mephius' courtiers were lined up. All of them were wearing hooded, ankle-length cloaks. These had been sent to each individual residence about a week earlier. They were patterned after the long robes that the elders usually wore and were apparently meant to be the formal attire that people were to wear whenever they visited the temple.

When they had first seen each other's appearance they had found it oddly amusing, yet not a single chuckle had slipped out; and after that, they had spent over an hour standing stock still, their backs ramrod straight.

Beyond the stairs, Guhl Mephius was proceeding towards the Dragon Gods' shrine, which had just been transferred from beneath the Black Tower to the interior part of the temple, and which was where the current elders were in the middle of conducting a ceremony.

The nobles and officers who were awaiting his return all had stiff expressions. In the past few years, the Emperor had done a complete turnabout and had become obsessed with ceremonies and rites, so if something occurred to even slightly spoil his mood during this celebration, who knew what kind of punishment it might bring down.

Not far from the temple were Empress Melissa and her daughters, Ineli and Flora – in other words, the people closest to the Emperor, and nobody wanted to let them see or hear anything unnecessary. Still, after being forced to endure the strain for so long, a few people had started whispered conversations if only to distract themselves from it.

“There was a rumour that Lord Gil’s funeral would be held after this ceremony, but at this rate, it looks like it will be put off again.”

“Even though the funeral of a son of the imperial family would surely have been an appropriate first ceremony for the temple.”

“Appropriate or not, don’t go speaking so rashly. If anyone with ill intentions heard your words, who knows how they might twist and spread them around.”

“Ah n-no, that wasn’t what I meant, my lord...” The elderly noble went pale and shook his head.

Nobody even smiled at the fact that a noble with years of service to Mephius would be so panicked at being criticised for such innocuous words. Such was the current state of things in Solon.

“Why is it being postponed like this?”

“First things first, Oubary’s execution should be held before the funeral. But even for that, there’s no date yet.”

Oubary, who had assassinated Crown Prince Gil, was currently being held in Solon’s dungeons. His immediate family, and even most of his relatives, had also been arrested. With still no indication of when his execution or Gil’s funeral were going to be held, the commemoration for the building of the temple had come first.

Normally, there would be nothing unusual about a few of the retainers giving their opinions, but now there was no one who would give counsel to the Emperor. Among the influential figures who were lined up there, Simon Rodloom, who should have been at their head, was still under house arrest. Additionally, and although there were probably none among those present who knew about it, most of those who were dissatisfied with the Emperor were currently gathered in the south, in Kilro.

“His Majesty had been pleased with the Prince’s more recent actions. And it was just then that he was assassinated. Perhaps the truth is that he cannot accept it yet.”

“Yeah. If belief in the Dragon Gods can ease His Majesty’s grief even just a little, we need to respect that.”

It was with those and similar excuses that they justified the cowardice of their tacit approval of the Emperor’s way of doing things – or rather, of their inability to voice their opinions.

It was at that point that the Emperor appeared. Nobles and officers alike immediately stopped talking, and nervousness flashed across their faces.

“It’s been hard on you all,” Guhl Mephius addressed them, a long staff held in his hand. He had only recently started carrying it around: it had a crystal ball at its tip which was said to symbolise the all-seeing eye of a Dragon God. Thanks to its fine craftsmanship, invisible to an observer, when light was shone on the crystal, it was refracted by means of minute grooves and curves, making it appear to be almost wrapped in flames.

Immediately after Guhl, staff in hand, had spent a short while with the crowd, who was offering him their congratulations, he started to walk away from the temple. A celebratory banquet was scheduled to be held after this in Solon’s main palace.

Imperial Guards acting as a guard of honour stood on either side of Guhl while behind him followed a group of elderly men with dark brown skin – the elders. It was with mixed feelings that the retainers bowed their heads and watched them file by.

At that moment –

“Your Majesty!”

Someone seemed to slide to their knees before the Emperor. It was a young noble who had been standing at the furthest position from the temple.

“Raymond, you insolent...!”

Whoever it was who had called out, they did not need to do so; even without

it, the honour guard were about to remove the noble called Raymond with their long-handled spears. He almost seemed to be clinging to the soldiers' feet, but he did not even seem to notice as he made his plea to the Emperor, who had slowed his steps somewhat.

Raymond stated that he normally worked in Nedain, a fortress between Birac and Solon, where he served the domain-lord Jairus and oversaw the area's villages. An incident had occurred there: a slave in a certain merchant's household had murdered his master and escaped. He was still only a boy, and this had been right after the slave revolt in Kilro. He had apparently been going to join the uprising, but because the merchant had connections with nobles, his pursuers had been relentless.

Wounded to his leg, he had managed to flee to a neighbouring village. The villagers had felt sorry for the young slave, and they had fed and sheltered him instead of notifying Nedain. Less than three days later however, the lord of Nedain had learned of his whereabouts and had sent a military unit to the village.

The villagers were given no chance to explain themselves, Raymond cried. The soldiers set fire to the village and killed the villagers as they tried to escape.

"Raymond, shut up. Shut up!"

That rough shout came from the very same person who had rebuked him earlier – the lord of Nedain, Jairus Abigoal.

The domain lords watching the scene quietly exchanged glances. They could somewhat sympathise with Jairus' feelings. If a problem arose on the land that they governed, then naturally it became a matter of the domain-lord's responsibility. Nowadays, who knew how terrifying an ending lay in wait for those whom the Emperor branded as "incompetent" and "useless"?

Fearing a repeat of Kilro, Jairus had gone overboard in hunting down a single slave. But for Raymond, who frequently made the rounds of the villages and who was friendly with the villagers, that was unforgivable.

"It must be contrary to the laws of Mephius. Your Majesty, please open an inquiry – Your Majesty!"

Raymond's face was almost touching the ground when Jairus, crimson-faced, rushed up to him and kicked him in the jaw.

"A bastard like you dares to speak of the laws of Mephius in His Majesty's presence? Cretin!"

Jairus stamped swiftly on Raymond's head and back. And while kicking him in front of everyone, in support of the abuse, he expounded on the question of Raymond's lineage.

He was from what had once been a powerful family in a territory ruled by Garbera. Even before the ten-year war, there had been skirmishes with Mephius and, about thirty years ago, the territory had fallen under Mephius' control during what had been none other than the current emperor, Guhl Mephius', first military campaign.

In less than a decade, the land itself had been recaptured by the then king of Garbera, Jeorg Owell, however, Raymond's family had thereafter remained in Mephius, where they had just barely managed to attain noble status. But in a country with a history as long as Mephius, newcomers were given the short end of the stick. On top of that, Raymond's family had, for generations, been followers of Badyne. "Defiling this auspicious occasion... it's easy to tell that you just want to spit on the Dragon Gods' faith, you bastard."

Jairus took advantage of the difference in position to vilify Raymond. Unable to oppose him, Raymond simply kept repeating his plea of "Your Majesty".

Guhl Mephius spared a single glance towards the young noble who was grovelling between the soldiers and Jairus, then swiftly raised his gaze and threw a glare at the lord of Nedain. Jairus' skinny frame instantly quivered.

"Please leave the rest to me. I would not wish to bother Your Majesty," he said in a trembling voice.

With that, it was over. Or at least, as far Emperor Guhl was concerned. The emperor with the impressive white beard did not so much as nod; instead, with an air of utter disinterest, he started walking away again.

"Wait – Your Majesty, please wait!"

Raymond's sorrowful voice echoed behind him.

Following after the Emperor, as though it were the most normal thing in the world, were the elders. Everyone else kept their heads more lowered than they needed to be.

Which meant that because most people were looking down, no one noticed how the elders and Empress Melissa exchanged a brief glance.

Despite the unforeseen incident at the commemoration ceremony, the banquet after had proceeded smoothly.

It was being held in the audience hall of the main palace, which had been freed up for the occasion, and was accompanied by the ever-wildly popular gladiator matches. The deaths and life-blood of humans had thus been chosen as the first offerings to the temple. No expense had been spared to bring in famous gladiators who had then taken each other's lives with sword and spear.

Guhl had only watched a few rounds before leaving his seat. He then waved his hand at the courtiers who had stood up to see him off –

“It'll be easier to get into the swing of things without me around. Enjoy yourselves from here on,” his teeth had gleamed as he laughed.

It was the first time in a long time that he had shown a smile in public, but the answering smiles from the retainers were somewhat stiff.

Before long, Empress Melissa also left her seat, as though following after him. One of the guests wiped the sweat that was dripping from his chin with the back of his hand – Folker Baran, one of the twelve generals and a man known to have nerves of steel.

“That was like being around Varsa, the ancient king whose gaze turned people into stone,” he said in a low aside.

While pretending to have fun at the banquet, a number of nobles wore clouded expressions as they glanced around the hall. Slaves were cleaning away the blood spilled by the gladiators. The dead were still being dragged away with hooks.

“If Lord Rodloom was here, it would have led to another dispute, wouldn't

it?” Someone muttered softly as they gazed at the ribbons of blood trailing along the palace floor. Gladiator matches and sword dances – Mephius’ other specialty – were typically held in other halls or buildings, this was probably the first time in history that matches were performed in the audience hall.

They could almost hear the elderly nobleman protesting against the great audience hall being defiled by blood.

I don’t understand... Many among the retainers were probably feeling the same bewilderment. His Majesty is reviving ancient traditions on the one hand while at the same time trampling over historic customs without batting an eyelid. Exactly like an infant testing the limits to see at what point his parents will tell him off.

The night had grown late.

“Your decision, my lord?”

In the Emperor’s bedroom, Melissa had wrapped a thin robe around her naked body and was snuggling up to Guhl. In the lamplight, her golden curls gleamed against the pillow. Smiling girlishly, her slender fingers traced along the Emperor’s chest. Who knows what sweet nothings she was murmuring?

“As long as the Garberan girl is here, that country won’t be able to interfere. And Ende’s internal disputes are coming to a head.”

Her whispered words touched directly on national affairs.

Guhl contemplated the undulating amber liquid in the wine cup that Melissa was holding out to him. He was not, by nature, an emperor who approved of women meddling in politics. Yet there was no anger in his eyes, which were filled with a light so dull as to appear listless.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. My lord, have you not allowed that terrible criminal to live precisely because you too were anticipating this?” Melissa giggled, her eyes sparkling. “No... Perhaps, His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince’s assassination was...” her murmured words faded away.

Guhl was looking at his wife from the corner of his eyes. Simply from that,

Melissa had started shuddering.

“You talk as though it were your own plan, but this too is all a ‘divination’ you’ve received from the elders, huh?”

“O-Of course,” Melissa seemed to be struggling to regain her smile.

His eyes dark, Guhl tipped the wine cup towards him. On the third time, his hand suddenly stopped and he once more looked down at his own face reflected in the liquid.

Part 2

In Kilro city, located more or less in the centre of the Domick Flats, there was an uproar.

Although, with that said, it was not a repeat of the same uproar which had gripped Solon when the slaves rose up in revolt. The populace was perfectly peaceful and the uproar was among those at the castle.

Fedom Aulin had been restless since morning. He had been firing instructions at his chamberlains and slaves, and was hurriedly getting ready to leave.

“Get a move on!”

He was not normally a man who shouted in front of others, but this time was an exception. He was so frantic that he was even kicking at his slaves to make them hurry with the preparations.

All of which was understandable.

It was here, in Kilro, that the leading figures of the anti-Guhl faction had gathered, having been called there by Fedom himself. They had shared the wish to oppose Emperor Guhl’s tyranny by supporting Crown Prince Gil, but when Gil died, their hopes had been completely dashed, and their plan had stalled halfway.

What occurred next happened just before anyone was able to think of a plausible reason to leave Kilro. A messenger arrived from Solon. To make matters worse, he was riding an indigo air carrier, indicating that he had been sent directly by the Emperor.

The members of the anti-Guhl faction, Fedom included, had blanched as soon as they saw the ship.

He definitely suspects something.

Fedom had pushed his plan forward with a cautiousness beyond caution. He

could not afford to be found out even by his own family. But of course, the more people he gathered, the greater the risk of a leak.

He had not been able to stop his hands from shaking.

When the messenger disembarked, he did not go to see the domain lord, Indolph York, nor did he inform Fedom Aulin that his end was upon him; instead, he met with only one of them – Nabarl Metti.

Nabarl was a soldier who led a troop of five hundred. While not under the command of any of the twelve generals, he sometimes took over the duty of defending a town, or went in reinforcement when an assault force needed supplementing. Their position was close to being that of a mercenary unit, and the Metti House itself was a family which had originally risen from being mercenaries; but, three generations ago, the emperor had personally recognised their achievements and all their men were promoted into regular soldiers with a regular pay.

Given the disturbance that had just arisen in Kilro, he had gone there under the pretext of helping to maintain security, but in reality, he had been taking part in frequent secret meetings with Fedom and the others. And just like them, the prince's death had robbed him of the chance of realising his ambition.

The Emperor himself had, for some reason, apparently ordered that very Nabarl to return to Solon. He boarded the air carrier as soon as it had finish resupplying.

"Sir Nabarl, what is going on? Sir Nabarl!" All the members of the anti-Guhl faction had of course pressed him with questions, but –

"I'm sorry. His Majesty has requested me for urgent business."

In the end, Nabarl had taken off without revealing what this 'business' was.

"T-This is bad," muttered Merlock, one of the remaining members of the anti-Guhl faction and a former member of the Imperial Council, his voice trembling slightly. He was a man who always looked as thin and as pale as an invalid, but now his face was so pallid he appeared on the verge of collapse. "That damn Nabarl could betray us. What if he informs on us to His Majesty?"

There were seven members of the anti-Guhl faction gathered in Kilro and,

needless to say, the same thought had occurred to the six remaining behind.

As a result, five of them had hastily started to make preparations to leave for Solon. They could not afford to lag behind Nabarl. They needed to be kneeling in front of the Emperor as quickly as possible and demonstrate that they had not the slightest intention of rebelling.

Kilro had a large air carrier base. None of them had ships at hand, but in a place like this, as long as they were unsparing with their money, nobles could buy ships.

All of which was why Fedom was in the middle of hurrying his preparations to go to Solon. If Nabarl informed on them then, as the ringleader who had assembled the anti-Guhl faction, Fedom would be in the gravest danger.

At this rate, rather... He considered not going to Solon but heading for Birac, where he would have his family board the ship before going either east or west – in any case, he needed to leave Mephius.

But... There was still a small part of Fedom that was calm. He recognised that if Nabarl was planning to betray them, there were some points that were strange.

While he was gathering his personal belongings, plunged into his own thoughts, Indolph York entered his chambers. He was one of the twelve generals, and had only just been appointed to govern Kilro.

“Lord Aulin, even you are leaving?”

Impatience and reproach alternated in the gaze he fixed on Fedom. He was the only one who was not preparing to go to Solon. Unless in case of extreme circumstances, he could not leave Kilro. It had not yet been two months since the slave revolt and he was under direct orders from the Emperor to spend some time in making every effort to ensure peace.

“Each and every single one of you is acting like a child whose father has just summoned them. And here I thought that you, Lord Aulin, were a man with guts.”

Are you abandoning me? was the unspoken appeal behind Indolph’s caustic words.

Fedom smiled insincerely. “Please be at ease, General. Nothing has been decided yet. We all merely wish to ascertain for ourselves what is going on, but no one is thinking of severing the bonds we have vowed here in Kilro.”

“Well, in that case, great...” the general was not about to drop his sarcastic tone of voice. “I, of course, believe that those bonds are solid and will not easily be broken but, doesn’t it look like Nabarl is actually connected to the Emperor?”

“About that,” wanting to finish his preparations quickly naturally made Fedom glib. It wasn’t that he was callous so much as he could not think of anything else. “I have my doubts.”

“Doubts?”

“If Nabarl was intending to inform on us, why would a messenger come specifically from Solon? Nabarl would have made some excuse or another and left by himself. Besides which, General, you must have seen it yourself – Lord Merlock’s face was even paler than usual, but after he had met with the messenger, Nabarl looked every bit as ill as he did. He was as white as a sheet! He was just as afraid that our plan had been exposed. We shouldn’t be too quick to assume that he’s betrayed us.”

“But,” Indolph shook his head, “doesn’t it come to the same thing? It’s completely unnatural for the Emperor to summon Nabarl directly. His Majesty probably suspects something and summoned Nabarl because he’s the youngest of us and the easiest to cajole. ‘You’re young and that’s why you were deceived. I can be lenient with you, so tell me all about the plan and its ringleader.’ He probably intends to get everything about us out of him by saying something along those lines and...”

“And that’s why!” Fedom shouted, taking Indolph by surprise. “It’s because all that’s unclear that I’m rushing to Solon.”

“B-But, I can’t leave Kilro. Surely you can sympathise with how I’m feeling.”

Fedom desperately tried to prevent his expression from showing how fed up he was. It was rather Indolph who looked like a child who was terrified of his father’s anger thundering down upon him.

But that's why... Yet rather than impatience at being pressed for time, it was a different emotion that came to Fedom. *That's why this man isn't likely to switch sides.*

The five who were hurrying to Solon might well think of taking the initiative to betray the others so as to protect their lives and assets, but Indolph York, on the other hand, was unable to meet with the Emperor for the time being. If he became too afraid of everything being revealed, he was probably more likely to want to accelerate the plan.

Hmm – Fedom Aulin once again hurriedly plastered on a fake smile. He believed that he should address the man's main concern.

"It's alright, General. I would never abandon you. Have you forgotten how we swore to share the same fate? No matter what vile plans Emperor Guhl Mephius uses to bring us down, they won't work. That old man can't see clearly anymore."

"Oh," Indolph sounded deeply moved. He knew how dangerous it was to openly criticise the Emperor at this point. He was touched that Fedom was sharing his thoughts despite the darkness that might lie ahead.

"The Emperor is surely afraid. At the same time, there are many who currently think that he is strange. In Solon, I'll be able to bring them over to our side. The Emperor is digging his own grave and we'll be able win over quite a few new comrades."

"I-I see. I see, as expected of you, Lord Aulin," Indolph's expression was admiring.

After spending a suitable amount of time with him, Fedom managed to drive out his trying companion.

He gave a short sigh. What he had told Indolph were not all lies fabricated on the spot. While in Kilro, he had actually sent his men to Solon several times to gauge how things were going there. One of his reasons was, of course, to make sure that the Emperor's faction had not noticed his group's intentions; so when that air carrier had landed with no prior warning, Fedom's blood had run colder than anyone's.

Anyway, it's a fact that things are becoming heavier in Solon.

Shaking off the fear that ran through his body, Fedom finished his own preparations, then went to stand by the window and glare towards the tower standing within the air carrier departure point.

According to recent reports, there had been a fire in Solon the day before the commemoration ceremony for the Dragon Gods' temple. It had originated at the mansion which had once been Oubary Bilan's residence. The flames were said to have blazed throughout the night, burning the mansion into oblivion. As there had been no servants living there, there were consequently no deaths, and the surroundings had equally been untouched by the blaze.

It's the Prince's wrath – some people whispered. Since the imperial family used the claim that they were descended from the Dragon God Mephius to increase their authority, one might have expected Emperor Guhl to make use of those rumours to inspire suitable amounts of awe in people; yet the Emperor had instead consulted the elders.

“No, it is surely Oubary Bilan's resentful soul. Because of his desire to plead his innocence, it is lashing out against Solon even while he is still alive,” they had responded.

What 'desire to plead his innocence'? Fedom was sceptical. Oubary had assassinated the Prince, so why did they feel the need to go out of their way to speak in his defence?

That's... It probably wasn't anything worth worrying about, but then again, as Guhl was now, Fedom was quite certain that he would not be involved in something like that without a plan in mind.

Or the fire might have been set on the Emperor's own orders. By having the elders give an opinion as he requested, he might be planning to use that for something...

It was then that a chamberlain came running in to inform him that all the preparations were complete. His cloak flapping, Fedom immediately strode to the air carrier departure ground.

Since there were a lot of other things to think about after having risen into

the sky, for the time being, he stopped mulling over the fire in Solon.

Fedom was not a god, so naturally, he could not have known it at the time. That his reading of the situation was half right and half wrong. Someone had undoubtedly set Oubary's residence on fire. But that person was not a subordinate to Mephius.

Part 3

For all that he was shut away in his mansion, people's mouths were not shut to him. Simon Rodloom had heard about the incident at the commemoration ceremony almost as soon as it had happened.

He was not personally acquainted with Raymond, but he had met his father a few times. That had been in the days when the Council still operated.

Raymond had been imprisoned on the charge of having defiled the ceremony. He would be dealt with, not in Solon, but in Nedain, where he had been transferred. This had been a one-sided decision made by Nedain's domain lord, Jairus; in other words, Emperor Guhl Mephius was completely uninterested in the matter.

Simon looked at the letter which was spread out on his desk; he had been writing a petition to the Emperor, but had stopped halfway.

He ordered me to stay under house arrest – His Majesty won't even glance at any letter I write.

If the Emperor was one who listened to his retainers, this situation would never have happened in the first place. Simon Rodloom leaned back into his chair and folded his arms.

When a quarrel had arisen between Garbera and Ende, and Crown Prince Gil had sent reinforcements to Garbera, Simon had defended his actions and had argued head-on against the Emperor. Even if he himself admitted that he had said too much, Guhl would not have listened to a soft-spoken opinion.

As a result, Simon was confined to his home. At one point, the Emperor had raged at him to "Get out of Mephius", but in the end, it had not reached the point where he had exiled the first among his long-serving retainers.

Although... Odyne Lorgo and Rogue Saian, the two generals who had been

deemed to have likewise approved of the Prince sending reinforcements, were being kept away from Solon. Without even being granted a chance to explain themselves, they had unilaterally been judged to have defied the Emperor.

Fearful of provoking the Emperor's wrath, not a single aristocrat had come to visit Simon. All he had received were letters from his daughters and sons-in-laws worrying about him, but this was simply because he had issued strict orders to his family to not come near.

Zaat Quark.

Simon suddenly thought back to that name while he was summoning a chamberlain to prepare tea. A few months earlier, during the Founding Festival, Simon had gone to visit Zaat, who had also been under house arrest. Later, Zaat would move his troops in a scheme to seize Mephius but, at the time, he had been no more than a man guilty of expressing his opinion to the Emperor. But regardless, Zaat had been ordered to remain at home without being allowed to say yea or nay, and when Simon had called on him, he had frankly expressed his dissatisfaction.

Thinking about it, while Simon had been trying to soothe and admonish Zaat, that might have been foreshadowing his own fate.

Was there righteousness in Zaat's actions? Simon had served Mephius' imperial family his entire life, but there were times when even he felt those doubts flitting through his breast. Those thoughts contradicted his very way of life and for Simon, already advanced in age, they were harsher than anything.

No – Simon sighed dejectedly and drank a mouthful of the warm tea.

Darkness was starting to shroud the scenery outside the window. When he had gotten up that morning, his plan for the day had been to write the letter then take a look at two or three books, but he had interrupted his letter-writing and doing anything else felt like a bother.

Zaat didn't have the calibre of a ruler. But then who does other than His Majesty...

The imperial lineage had never been severed. The crown on their head and authority in their hands, all of Mephius' emperors had belonged to the imperial

bloodline. If it were ever extinguished by rebellion and insurrection, in order to decide who would next sit on the throne, chaos was sure to rage throughout the country like a tempest.

The wounds of the ten-year war had yet to heal and Mephius was unavoidably weakened. Furthermore, the relationship between it, Garbera, and Ende were currently unstable. On top of that, although they were suppose to be tied in alliance with Garbera, Princess Vileena, who should have married into Mephius, was now instead in an extremely precarious situation.

Needless to say, this was due to the death of her fiancé, Crown Prince Gil. It had now been almost two months since Gil had passed away, yet she still remained in Mephius. Rumour had it that she was intending to remain at least for the funeral; but while on the one hand, there was much sympathy for Princess Vileena, it was also widely acknowledged that her presence had become a nuisance.

There was no other young man in the imperial family whose age was a suitable match to hers. That being the case, she could only return to Garbera. Whereupon, it would be time to explore other alternatives: consider a new marriage between Princess Ineli and someone from Garbera's royal family, work out some other measure, or even re-examine the alliance itself. Of late, the Emperor had frequently been meeting with envoys from Ende, and those around him who liked to look like they were in his confidence went around declaring that – *it's all very well for her to wallow in maidenly feelings, but she will soon have to decide on her future course.*

Simon himself could not help feeling a certain compassion for the Garberan princess. She had been noted for personally flying an airship during both Ryucown's subjugation and Zaat's rebellion, but since being informed of the Crown Prince's death, she had barely gone out in public; and from what he had heard, when envoys from Garbera had come and had brought up the topic of the princess' future, all she had said, in as few words as possible, was that she would stay in Mephius.

No matter how brave she was, she was still only fourteen. But then again, it was always the case that highborn ladies were the playthings of Fate when countries were at war. Not even Simon was inclined to back Princess Vileena to

any excessive degree. Still, there was no doubt that the future of the alliance with Garbera would be vitally important in determining what would happen next for Mephius.

Simon sipped the last mouthful remaining in his cup. *Really, I had tea at such an awkward time.* It would soon be dinnertime. While he was wondering whether to go to the kitchen and tell them to delay supper a little, he instead found himself getting a call from a chamberlain. Who looked remarkably flustered. Simon had an intuition.

“A visitor?” he asked.

Simon had warned even his family not to approach, yet he saw the chamberlain nod.

In that case, has my sentence been pronounced? He steeled himself. Yet when he heard the name in the next moment, Simon, unbefitting of one of the leading figures in Mephius, looked almost confounded.

“This... I would very much like to wish you welcome, but...” Simon ushered his guest into a chair in the parlour while ordering the chamberlain to prepare more tea.

As a matter of fact, when he had learned his visitor’s identity, he had wondered whether he should be allowing them into the residence. However, although they had hardly ever spoken to each other, he had heard quite a few anecdotes about the other’s personality – refusing them would definitely lead to their calling a second, third and fourth time. Since that would arouse unnecessary concern from all sides, Simon decided that it was best to meet directly this once.

“Both my situation and yours, Princess, are a trifle delicate. I’m surprised that you were able to come here.”

“Since things are delicate, everyone seems quite troubled,” smiling back at him was none other than the one Simon had been thinking about just shortly before; the third princess of Garbera, Vileena Owell. “And therefore, there was no one to directly stop me. They went so far as to hope that I would enjoy

myself when I went out.”



She thanked the servant who was offering her tea. Watching the girl wrap both hands around the cup as if for warmth, even though it was not cold, Simon thought – *Rumour says that she's crushed by despair, but that doesn't seem to be the case*. But he could not deny that the once girlishly full contours of her face had grown narrower. It was too soon, however, for her features to look like those of an adult. It was just that her eyes seemed large and the shadow of heartache sometimes fell across her countenance. Even so, Vileena's voice was clear and those large eyes looked straight at him. In that, she was unchanged.

Well now... Ever since he had heard her name, Simon had been unable to shake off his bemusement.

"So then, Princess...Why did you come to see me?"

Normally, Simon would not be so uncouth as to cut straight to the main point, but the hour was what it was. Outside the window, the darkness was growing deeper.

"Right," Vileena let go of the cup and smiled again, "I came to have a chat over tea."

"Huh?"

"You are a leading figure in Mephius, Lord Rodloom, and I called on you to drink tea."

"That's..."

"There is no other meaning to it. Since coming to Mephius, I have barely spoken with any gentleman other than the Crown Prince. They say that if you wish to know about the situation in a house, you should catch hold of women, as they tend to the kitchen; but that if you want to know about a country, it is important to talk to men."

Showing hazily through the steam, Vileena's face looked somewhat ephemeral. Simon smiled wryly.

"I am a man with no power, Princess. His Majesty has entrusted me neither with land nor with soldiers. Well, since the only thing I have piled up are idle years, there might one or two topics I can offer you in place of teacakes."

There's certainly no girl like her in Mephius – while smilingly dealing with her, Simon felt a certain admiration, but also a certain something uncanny towards the fourteen-year-old girl. She was almost too used to being around adults, which was certainly the mark of a highborn young lady, but – and he was a little reluctant to use this example in this situation – unlike Mephius' Princess Ineli, she did not appear to excel at the art of using her age and position to fit in with her surroundings and acquire their affection.

“What should we talk about?”

“Well then,” Vileena answered immediately, without even pretending to think about it, “I would like to hear stories about His Majesty the Emperor.”

“About His Majesty?”

“Yes,” as impudent as her suggestion was, Vileena's expression remained unconcerned.

Simon was almost left speechless, but he quickly rallied. He was starting to enjoy the Princess' unconventional remarks.

“I understand. Although I'm afraid that an old man's stories will be a little boring.”

With that preface, Simon started talking about the Emperor and about himself, who had served him for most of his life.

“As the heir to the Rodloom House, I served His Majesty from childhood. It is the custom for those of my house to be educated alongside sons of the imperial family.”

In those days, apart from Guhl, there were two other candidates to succeed the throne. Although he was the eldest son, Guhl had delicate health and did not easily trust others, so he was somewhat isolated at court.

Looking back, Simon believed that it had probably started when, during one of the dragon hunts that used to take place all over the country, Guhl had watched his mother die right before his eyes. Guhl was not yet ten years old at the time.

Serving close to him was no easy task. He was moody and quick to start

yelling when something displeased him. He was also deeply suspicious, and it took Simon nearly five years to convince him that he was not his enemy but his ally.

“Ever since he was young, he would very easily get emotional. However – or rather, because of that – he isn’t very good with reasoned arguments. If you try to admonish him through logic, he will resist, so the way to go about it is to tell him ‘I understand your opinion, but let me give you mine as a reference’.”

Also, it was even better to do so in public. Guhl tended to become argumentative when he was alone with someone, but if he was in front of other people, he could make a show of generously accepting the opinion of a subject. It was from that time onwards that Guhl had become aware of the ‘qualities of an emperor’. Simon had helped detect the hard-earned ‘qualities’ that Guhl strove towards and had offered advice in ways that did not put Guhl off, all the while growing closer to him.

“His Majesty is apt to withdraw into his own shell, but that is also why, once he accepts someone as an ally, that bond will be firm. He had a somewhat bashful smile that he only ever showed to his friends, which I liked.”

Partly thanks to Simon unsparing efforts, Guhl gradually learned self-control and how to turn his inherently suspicious nature into one which observed his surroundings, which allowed him to broaden his field of vision.

Then, when he was seventeen, he had made his military debut in a skirmish against Garbera. He had only been provided with fifty soldiers, but he had earned the achievement of single-handedly killing the enemy commander. Having gained considerable self-confidence from that, Guhl had then gone on to gather experience and to build a solid foundation for eventually becoming emperor of Mephius.

Although one problem had still remained. Guhl had been required to get married before he took the throne, but, to the dismay of those around him, he had continued to remain single for a very long time. Simon had also advised him on it time and time again, but –

“I’m not a studhorse. Don’t worry about what will happen after my death Simon, because if it happens, I’ll die after having left everything to you.”

It was impossible to tell whether he was joking or serious.

He was past forty when he eventually married a girl called Lana. Even though her family was of the nobility and had long been loyal to the imperial family, it was not a House that had previously been connected through marriage to the ruling family.

“Because of that, Her Majesty Lana was not at all familiar with the customs of the imperial family. Other members of the family insulted her behind her back and criticised her to her face but, every time, His Majesty would shield and protect her.”

Perhaps it was because he now had something to protect, but Guhl had taken on the ‘qualities’ of a statesman more than ever before.

“Although... I believe than in a certain sense, Lady Lana was the one protecting His Majesty, and she guided him more than I ever could.”

Lana rapidly grasped Guhl’s character and easily handled what Simon had struggled with up until then. Although usually a woman of few words, she took the initiative of offering Guhl her opinion in such a way that he would not betray those ‘qualities’. In so doing, she had often helped retainers who had incurred Guhl’s wrath for some mistake or another. On top of that, as she had always publicly deferred to Guhl having the final say, she had made sure to preserve the Emperor’s self-esteem...

Having reached that point in his tale, Simon suddenly blinked as though coming back to reality.

“Rather than stories about the Emperor, I’m afraid I’ve inflicted an old man’s ramblings on you...” the elderly nobleman gave a strained laugh, but – “No, not at all,” Vileena shook her head.

Since the tea had gone cold, Simon was going to call for more, but here again, she said “no”.

“Thank you very much,” the Princess lowered her eyes. “Having come from another country, I will probably not have the pleasure of meeting you as often as I would wish, but from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for today and for this rare chance to speak with you, Lord Rodloom.”

She left.

To the very end, neither Vileena nor Simon had pronounced the deceased Crown Prince's name. Simon thought that strange, given that he had supposed that she would shift the topic from the Emperor to Gil Mephius.

Simon actually felt somewhat dissatisfied because of it.

That princess... What did she come for? He could not read her intentions. Had she come to amuse herself by playing the gracious lady?

At any rate, he had gone out to see her off as she left the mansion with the lady's maid who had apparently been waiting for her in another room.

I spoke too much today.

Perhaps he had been starved for conversation since he had no visitors. As he returned to his room, Simon bitterly recalled the conversation with Vileena. He found himself pathetic for having talked about the Emperor so boastfully. If he could handle him even a tenth as well as he had boasted to the princess, he would not be in his current situation.

Ah! Simon was struck with a feeling of surprise before immediately telling himself that he must be mistaken.

No... but... it couldn't possibly...

Given the Princess' personality, she could not possibly view Emperor Guhl's current behaviour as righteous. After all, the Emperor had tried to prevent reinforcements from reaching her home country, Garbera. It seemed to Simon, in that moment, that the Princess might have been collecting information in order to confront Guhl, the "enemy".

In other words, this was the manifestation of her intention to sacrifice herself by coming to Mephius.

In that case, she might come again... Simon heaved a sigh.

His predictions, however, would turn out to be completely wrong. Two days after visiting his mansion, Vileena did something that neither Simon nor anyone else at the palace had expected.

Chapter 2: Intentions

Part 1

It had been three days since the commemoration ceremony. The imperial court of Solon had, of late, constantly been wrapped in a gloomy atmosphere, but this morning, things were slightly different. The previous day, Colyne Isphan, who oversaw matters relating to the Emperor's audiences, had received a request for an audience from Princess Vileena.

Originally, the Princess' turn should have been in the evening but, when the Emperor had been personally reviewing the schedule, he had granted his permission for her to have the very earliest audience.

The audience hall was unusually full for that hour of the day, probably because people were curious about whether the Garberan princess had finally decided on her own course of action. Which day she would announce as her departure date had become the subject of many a bet, and most of the nobles living in or around Solon had shown up.

"Lady Vileena Owell, princess of Garbera."

With the announcement from the crier, a slender foot stepped onto the red carpet that was stretched out along the audience hall. The foreign princess who had been supposed to become the Crown Prince's wife walked forward, her back straight and her steps steady. Gossip held that she would be haggard from her fiancé's death and from fretting over the uncertainty of her own fate, yet her gaze was firm.

Her platinum-colour hair tumbling along her back, Vileena kneeled before the

throne.

“It is a great honour to be able to meet with you, Your Majesty.”

After having given her greetings, Vileena imparted the purpose of her audience. And the assembled crowd, desperately trying not to let their curiosity show on their faces, heard something somewhat unexpected.

“I wish to be allowed to leave Solon for a short while.”

Solon? For a short while?

The people there looked at each other. They would have understood it if she had said that she wanted to leave Mephius, but she had expressly limited herself to ‘leaving Solon’. And only ‘for a short while’ at that.

What now, at this point in time?

A disappointed expression appeared on the gawkers’ faces. Among them, however, there were some who whispered –

No, don’t be too hasty. She must be hesitant to suddenly bring up going back to Garbera, so she’s saying things in a roundabout way.

However –

“I would like to go to Nedain. I have heard that Lord Rogue Saian is there.”

Silence descended upon the hall the moment that Rogue’s name was brought up. Rogue Saian was being kept away from Solon, having incurred the Emperor’s wrath for turning a blind eye when the Prince – against the Emperor’s wishes – had taken reinforcements to Garbera. The people who had gathered out of idle curiosity all fearfully looked up to see what the Emperor’s expression was.

Sitting on the throne in his usual posture, his chin resting on his hand, Guhl Mephius asked, “What business do you have with Rogue, Princess?”

He was currently showing no hint of anger. Faster than the nobles could pat their chests in relief, however, Vileena replied –

“I have heard that the survivors of His Highness the Crown Prince’s Imperial Guards are with Lord Rogue. I have yet to thank them for rescuing my native

country. Therefore, as a matter of honour, I wish to call upon them,” she announced in a clear voice.

It was silent no more as a babble broke from each person’s lips. Vileena’s words were endorsing Gil’s action of defying the Emperor. Besides which, she had deliberately spoken of “honour” with regards to the people who had allowed or assisted those actions. In other words, it was the same as her declaring to Emperor Guhl that – *what you did was not honourable*.

W-What is she saying? One noble stole a glance at his neighbour. *I know that the Princess is valiant, but she can’t possibly be defying His Majesty to his face?*

No, she’s just an ignorant kid. She thinks that it’s fine for her to say whatever she pleases.

Entirely heedless of the tense atmosphere that had suddenly enveloped the great hall, the Princess awaited the Emperor’s words with her head still bowed.

One second passed. Then two. The three.

The aides to the Emperor had never felt time pass so slowly. It was as though the silence itself had turned into the fangs and claws of some demon which was ripping at their fragile hearts.

“Oh?”

When Emperor Guhl Mephius’ voice sounded like a low growl, everyone’s shoulders jerked. All of the retainers looked downwards, as though trying to avoid the roared rebuke which was about to descend upon the hall like a crash of thunder. However –

“Envoys from Garbera are expected to arrive next month, however...” what Guhl said made it seem like he did not mind the princess’ words.

“I will take about a week,” answered Vileena.

“In that case,” Guhl gave a faint smile, “you didn’t need to go out of your way like this, Princess. What you have seen of Solon and Apta was also hurried. You should take this time to stretch your wings.” The Emperor spoke generously, but given that Vileena had thus “gone out of her way”, it could also be taken as her wanting to criticise the Emperor’s way of doing things in front of both him

and his retainers. Guhl being Guhl, he laughed at having “gone out of his way” to point that out.

The tension in the hall did not subside until the Princess excused herself from the Emperor’s presence. Thinking about it calmly, Vileena was a guest from another country; even if what she said did not fit in with the Emperor’s thoughts, he could not unilaterally punish her.

Everyone recognised, however, that if anyone other than the princess were to speak such an inconvenient truth then, even if they were someone of as much influence as Simon, they would only end up being imprisoned. It was easily the most difficult thing about the Emperor.

Or rather... There were probably one or two people whose thoughts ran along these lines: or rather, if he acted tyrannically even towards Vileena, a guest left in their care by a foreign country, it would indicate that he no longer had the calibre needed to be emperor, and there would then be a good chance that Mephius’ retainers would unite and confront him.

The Emperor, however, remained entirely clear-sighted. It was just that, although he was clear-sighted, he was also unusually self-righteous.

Guhl Mephius was a difficult ruler.

Vileena left Solon three days after the audience. Arrangements had been made for an air carrier, but she had chosen to travel by horse-drawn carriage. Accompanying her were more than fifty soldiers, assigned to guard her, and Theresia, her lady’s maid who had travelled with her from Garbera. A ferry had been hastily sent to Nedain, and it was said that more soldiers would come from Nedain, and would meet up with them along the way.

“Princess, the weather really is lovely,” said Theresia, looking out of the carriage window. Vileena smiled faintly. “You seem to have something you want to say. Theresia, whenever you break the ice like that, it means you’re either going to scold me or give me advice. And you first start talking about the weather to sound me out.”

“You are very discerning. Why did you not consult with me at all? About

having an audience with His Majesty. Saying that you want give thanks for the reinforcements to Garbera simply sounds like sarcasm against the Emperor.”

“I thought that if I had told you, you wouldn’t have agreed, Theresia.”

“Of course not.”

“Even I’m not just a thoughtless child. I only acted after very, very deep consideration.”

How so? Theresia did not say anything, but the curve of her mouth conveyed her feelings. Vileena pretended not to have seen and instead, like Theresia, looked up at the sky through the window. The weather was not as clear as the former head Garberan lady’s maid had said, but a sky so blue it pierced the eyes occasionally peeped through the gaps in the grey clouds.

Still... Theresia studied her young mistress’ profile. If Vileena had consult her, she would naturally have voiced her opposition, but she would also, from the bottom of her heart, would have supported her in whatever she wanted to do.

How long has it been now since Crown Prince Gil passed away?

That confused and chaotic time in Apta Fortress spontaneously resurfaced in her mind. Prince Gil had been shot...

When she received the news, Vileena muttered a single word – “Impossible” – and raced through the fortress. It was said that Gil had been shot when he had gone out onto a balcony, and that he had fallen into the River Yunos. A search party had immediately been assembled. Vileena herself had joined the line of airships. Flying in the middle of the night was, of course, dangerous; Theresia had called out to stop her, but Vileena did not even appear to hear her, and flew along the Yunos to the limits of her ship’s ether reserves.

When she returned temporarily to replenish them, a new piece of information had arrived. A search party had seen soldiers from the Black Armour Division racing along the opposite bank. Part of the search party had been sent out as messengers to the Taúlian side to request permission to cross the border. Meanwhile, with every second lost unbearable to her, Vileena flew as close to the border as she could.

Even when the river’s surface started to reflect the morning light, there was

nothing to show for these efforts. Having run out of ether and returned to the fortress for who knew how many times, Vileena received yet another fresh piece of news.

One of the Imperial Guards' search parties had run into the Black Armour Division, which was attempting to flee by crossing the border with Taúlia. They had all but annihilated one another. Amongst those of the guards who had fallen victim during the fight, and who did not make it back to Apta, were two that the Prince relied on: Orba and Shique. The Princess knew both of them.

Hearing of the deaths of those she knew one after another, and exhausted from having flown all night, the Princess was no longer able to stand. For a fourteen-year-old girl, it must have felt as though the world she had known was collapsing. Theresia had hurriedly run over, had called for help, and had brought the Princess back to her room in the fortress.

After that, time slipped by with dizzying speed. Help arrived from Birac and Solon to assist in the search, and a battalion's worth of airships was added. Taúlia also helped search along the border, but nothing came of that either. Even when she had been urged to return to Solon, Vileena had refused to give up until the very end and flown a ship as often as humanly possible, until finally, a messenger had come directly from the Emperor, whom she could not defy.

Theresia remembered that last day in Apta.

Having asked permission from the chamberlain attached to the Prince, a boy called Dinn, Vileena had entered the Prince's private room. It seemed as though the Princess, having finally resigned herself, was looking for a keepsake with which she could immerse herself in memories or keep hidden on her person. However –

“He is a ‘liar’,” Vileena's blueish eyes glittered. “The kind of person who deceives his friends to trick his enemies. At Zaim Fortress, at Mephius' Founding Festival, and also in the battles between Apta and Taúlia... he is always like that.

“How did I not notice until now? The Prince is deceiving us again so he must be planning something. How many times does he think he can trick me? Right, Theresia, lend me a hand. There is definitely a secret somewhere in this room. Or maybe a letter to me...”

With the accumulated exhaustion from the previous days, Vileena was in a kind of manic state. Sorrow and despair forgotten, her young mistress' face was wreathed in cheerful smiles – Theresia found it wretchedly painful. It seemed to her that during the time spent searching the Prince's room, each minute, each second, would erode the Princess' buoyant feelings, that cruel reality would sink in like water being absorbed by silk floss, and that in the end, she would be crushed by sorrow and despair even greater than before.

Her prediction proved correct. The sky outside the window had grown bright and the ship had arrived to pick her up, but up until the last moment, Vileena had stayed in the Prince's room. In the end, she had finally stopped walking around the room, stopped rummaging along the shelves, stopped talking to Theresia even, and had simply stood vacantly in place. Theresia could not find the words to say to her mistress who was in that state.

Prince Gil Mephius is cruel.

To his fiancée, who had traveled far from another country – and one which had, until just before, been an enemy that fought continuous, bloody battles against them – he had never once spoken gently nor given a single gift. Even though her ever self-willed princess had made great efforts to repress herself, to grow familiar with this country, and to try and understand the Prince; every time, he would dodge the issue, immerse himself in his work, and leave the Princess to experience solitude.

Truly cruel.

Yet even so, finally... finally, Theresia had observed that a mutual exchange of feelings had started to bud between the young pair. Which was why she could not forgive him. For having disappeared so abruptly. For having left Vileena alone in this country.

After they had returned to Solon, Vileena had spoken less and less. It had been better in Apta, where she had gone searching each day until she was utterly exhausted. At least there had been something that needed doing. She had not been tormented then with her own ominous thoughts, nor had she felt as though her body were being ripped apart by grief.

It's like the soul has been plucked out of her body – Theresia had not been

alone in thinking that.

Two weeks later however, Vileena changed again. She had been sitting alone on her bed, her head bowed and her expression listless, absorbed in her own thoughts.

I'm not doing this right – Theresia had thought suddenly as the conversation was about to peter out. Anxious not to run out of topics to talk about, she had brought up the Imperial Guards who had once served the Prince. Theresia had heard that the survivors from the battle with the Black Armour Division had been incorporated into Rogue Saian's division. Among them were Gowen, the commander of the Guards, and Pashir, who had fought the masked Orba in the finals of the Founding Festival's gladiatorial tournament. There was also Gowen's adopted daughter, Hou Ran, who, unusually for a woman, worked as a dragon handler.

As soon as she heard about it, Vileena's eyebrows twitched. *Dammit* – Theresia instantly thought. She knew the habits of the girl she had served for many years, so how could she not realise that Vileena had hit upon some idea or another?

Rogue Saian had angered the Emperor and was currently being kept away from Solon, in a town called Nedain. Theresia had already somewhat resigned herself when she had brought up that last, desperate conversational gambit.

And, as expected, Vileena and Theresia were now being jolted along in a horse-drawn carriage on the highway to Nedain.

Theresia sighed. There was nothing unusual about the speed of Vileena's decisions and actions. Although Theresia had felt her blood run cold when she had heard that the princess had spoken what sounded like defiance towards the Emperor, she did not, in fact, think that going to Nedain was a bad idea.

She did not know what her mistress intended to do over there but, when someone close to you died, it was only by sorting through the many things coiled up inside you – including those that, from an outside perspective, seemed utterly unrelated – that you could learn to accept reality. Theresia herself had sometimes done as much when her parents and younger brother had passed away.

Still –

“Princess,” in this situation, Theresia definitely had to give her mistress a warning. “Princess, I am on your side no matter what.”

“Of course I know that.”

“That being the case, there is one thing that I would like you to listen to me about. The lord of Nedain, Jairus Abigoal... I believe that you are already familiar with the name, Princess.”

“Uh humm...”

Vileena gave a slight nod. That sound, which was like a cross between ‘uh huh’ and ‘hmm’, was very much like the one that her grandfather, Jeorg, made when he wanted to show someone he trusted that he was listening to what they were saying. When Vileena imitated her grandfather like that, it was usually when she was putting on an important air and wanted to hide her intentions from the other person.

“I earnestly ask you not to interrogate Lord Abigoal directly, or to scold him, as you did with His Imperial Majesty. Princess, your position here in Mephius is currently a very delicate one. Please do not stir things up even more.”

“I know,” answered Vileena, resting her cheek on her hand.

She had heard that Lord Jairus and a young noble who served him, called Raymond, had quarrelled in the Emperor’s presence. Afterwards, Raymond had summarily been dealt with by being thrown into prison. Theresia naturally understood that her mistress was uneasy about this. Knowing Vileena’s personality, she might well berate the domain lord to his face and cause an unnecessary uproar.

“Promise me, Princess.”

“You’re so persistent. I won’t interrogate him and I won’t scold him. I promise,” Vileena said, unconcernedly.

The carriage continued along the highway at a leisurely pace. They were to arrive in Nedain on the evening of the third day after they had left Solon, and it was that day that they met up with the guards which had been sent from

Nedain.

“Princess,” Theresia called out as she looked through the window. Leading the horse riders was an old soldier with tanned skin: Gowen, who had once been the commander of the Prince’s Imperial Guards. He came up to the carriage and gave his greetings to the princess. At the same time, he said not a word about the Crown Prince.

“Uh hum,” Vileena nodded graciously while casting a somewhat thoughtful eye on the veteran soldier.

Part 2

On the day of the Garberan princess' departure from Solon, Imperial Princess Ineli Mephius was irritably pacing around in her own room.

She was the daughter of Melissa, Guhl's second wife, and she too had tended to stay indoors ever since she had been informed of the Crown Prince's death. Although in Ineli's case, the reason was slightly different than it had been for the royal princess. When she had gone to Apta, the suspicions she had harboured that the crown prince might actually have been an impostor had turned into conviction. Just when she had believed that things would be turning interesting, she had heard the news that the Prince had been killed.

It can't be.

Ineli could not accept it. Not only because her hard-earned amusement had fallen apart in her hands, but also because she had assumed that the impostor, who had survived the imperial palace and the battlefield, would not die so easily.

Who was that man?

His face was so like her step-brother's, it was almost scary. Even his father, Emperor Guhl, had not noticed anything when they met. The person inside, however, was completely different from the Gil that Ineli knew well. This man made brilliant use of soldiers, had seemed almost indifferent when confronting Zaat Quark who had a gun pointed straight at him, and on top of that, he was an outstanding swordsman.

She had once wondered whether he was someone of high standing, however, if that was the case, it was inconceivable that someone so talented and whose face looked exactly like the Crown Prince's could have failed to attract attention within Mephius. Had someone brought a boy from another country, or found a slave or some other lowly person who happened to resemble Gil? Had that

someone, judging that he could be of use as a body double, then trained him through long years of education?

Then, that someone...

While Ineli was chewing her thumb and deep in thought, there was a knock at the door. She frowned, narrowing her eyes.

“Didn’t I say that no one was to come in?” She demanded in a shrill voice. Recently, she had often raised her voice against the ladies’ maids and noble young ladies that she normally got on well with. “I beg your pardon, Princess. Your sister, Princess Flora, says that she earnestly wishes to see you.”

“Flora?”

Ineli twirled her golden hair around her finger. It was unusual for her younger sister to come and see her in person; she reluctantly gave permission for her to be allowed in.

Lead in by a tall lady’s maid, Flora timidly made her appearance. Like Ineli, she was Melissa’s child from her previous marriage, and she was five years younger than her sister. She had just turned eleven during that year’s Founding Festival.

At eleven, Ineli had already made her debut in high society and had been assigned a great many private tutors, so she remembered being busy every day. Flora however was introverted by nature and, in the past, her health had been frail. She did not have any close friends, and since her mother had become empress, she had rarely had the opportunity to leave the Inner Quarters.

“What do you want? Please make it short.”

Ineli stopped the lady’s maid who was about to lay out tea and coldly had her leave. Half-hidden behind the tall lady’s maid, Flora was hanging her head low. Unlike Ineli, who had inherited their mother’s blond locks, Flora had their father’s dark, reddish-brown hair. Perhaps it was because she had delicate features, but she gave a slightly subdued impression compared to her mother and sister’s flamboyant beauty.

The uncomfortable silence stretched on and Ineli was just about to irritably open her mouth when the lady’s maid explained in Flora’s place.

“Her Highness said that she wished to read a book with her older sister.”

“A book?”

Ineli noticed that Flora was carrying a largish book in her arms.

You still have that? Treasuring something like that...

She felt fed up. It was a book full of illustrated fairy-tales that their deceased father had bought when they were very young. Originally, it had belonged to Ineli, but Flora loved it and, when she was little, she would often ask her older sister to read it to her. And so, some years back, Ineli had given it to her during the Founding Festival.

That was the year after their father had passed away.

In a very grown-up gesture, Ineli closed her eyes and shook her head.

“There’s no need to read it anymore because it’s already been read more than enough. Flora, you should stop with such childish books and read something that at least will help you improve yourself. Like Mother said, you will soon be getting dancing and painting instructors. Now, hurry on back to your room.”

“...Yes, Older Sister,” Flora, still concealed behind the lady’s maid, replied in a fading voice. With trudging footsteps, she left the room.

Once the door had shut, Ineli put her hands to her narrow waist and shrugged her shoulders in apparent exasperation.

Wouldn’t it be nice if I could also act so childishly?

Her irritation was not only due to the matter about Prince Gil. That morning, when the imperial family had been sitting together for breakfast, the Emperor had suddenly declared that, “Ineli will be seventeen before long. It will soon be time to think about a partner for you.”

Even as she was responding to Guhl’s words with a smile, Ineli’s heart felt chilled. By “partner”, he meant of course Ineli’s marriage partner. She did not know whether those he had in mind were from inside or outside of the country. Still now that it was rumoured that Princess Vileena, the cornerstone in the peace with Garbera, would soon be returning to her country, she had heard

speculation that there was a high chance that Princess Ineli would be betrothed to someone from the Garberan royal family, and also that Taúlia had been sounding out how to consolidate the alliance through marriage.

This isn't funny.

At this point in time, she absolutely did not want to leave Mephius for a foreign country, or marry either an unrefined Mephian aristocrat or loutish military man.



Ineli was a sixteen-year-old maiden, and she had already gone through puppy love with one of her private tutors. There was no one in her heart at present and, unlike others, she did not yearn for love itself. She did harbour a woman's rejection of being married just to serve as a political tool, but more importantly, the thought of becoming nothing more than a prop to support her husband from behind filled Ineli with dread.

I am not a princess who is a mere figurehead. I will one day leave my name behind throughout the country, no throughout the world.

It was thanks to that conceit in herself that she had been able to overcome the shock of the Emperor's words that morning, or, indeed, of her step-brother's death.

She had to make her move while there was still time. First, she needed to prove that she was sufficiently competent to act as the Emperor's right-hand.

And for that, I need to solve the mystery of Gil Mephius. That man was definitely an impostor. But if I tell that to Father at this late hour, I'll just be laughed off.

Which reminded her that before and after the Founding Festival, a noble called Fedom Aulin had very conspicuously gotten closer to Gil. When Ineli had suspected the Prince of being an impostor, she had personally asked Fedom some leading questions. From what Ineli had observed, Fedom was nowhere near as clever as he believed himself to be. Fedom had feigned unconcern, but he had not been able to hide the turmoil in his eyes.

If Fedom had plotted to replace the Crown Prince with a body double, then that was, of course, a heinous crime that could have overthrown the country. Furthermore, since "Prince Gil's death" had been officially announced when the impostor had died, that meant that the real Gil Mephius had already passed away. And if Fedom Aulin was involved in *that*...

Then this might also be some kind of plot of Fedom's. After all, Gil Mephius' body still hasn't been found. Since he defied the Emperor over those reinforcements, they must have been afraid of being rebuked for it, and that if there was an in-depth investigation, his real identity would be discovered – so they had him temporarily vanish while actually, behind the scenes, Fedom would

be gathering sympathisers to overthrow Father and, when the time is right, Crown Prince Gil will once more appear on stage...

Ineli was not a person of extraordinary insight. She was the type to easily get emotional and did not ponder deeply over intellectual matters. However, her almost obsessive belief that the impostor Gil had to be alive so that she could take revenge on him had brought Ineli very close to the truth.

I need to meet with Fedom.

Just as Ineli had come to that conclusion, there was once more a sound at the door. A lady's maid informed her that a messenger had come from Ineli's friends, Baton Cadmus and Troa Hergei. They had once gone together with Gil to Rogue Saian's residence. Thinking about it now, she was sure that Gil had been replaced since around that time.

The messenger had brought an invitation to go out and have fun with them. She had been confined in the palace's Inner Quarters for so long that it must be stifling for her, so would she not come out with them, to the gladiator arena, or on a long horse ride, or wherever?

Ineli snorted and told the lady's maid to give some suitable excuse to send him away.

At a time like this. Flora too, but really, how long are they all going to remain children?

As far as Ineli was concerned, her own thoughts and concerns were, at any and all times, her highest priority, and anything else was utterly trivial.

Brat.

Ineli suddenly started, eyes wide. Her clear white skin rapidly turned red as the blood rushed to her head.

You don't know anything. Any more whining from you and I'll strangle you with my own hands. Got it, little girl?

Ineli's slender shoulders shook, the muscles along her back shivered, and before long, her entire body was trembling. The time when Gil Mephius' impostor had called her a brat vividly came back to her. She unconsciously

ground her teeth.

That man has to be alive. So that I can kill him with my own hands. No, even if he really is already dead, if I have to, I'll invite sorcerers versed in the deepest mysteries of magic from the east to revive him so that I can kill him all over again!

At about the same time, as though to replace Vileena, an air carrier arrived in Solon. The one who appeared from within it, almost seeming to tumble out of it, was Nabarl Metti. Outwardly, this military officer had gone to Kilro to help its newly appointed lord, Indolph; but, needless to say, he was in fact one of the anti-Guhl faction who had responded to Fedom's appeal.

Just after Nabarl's departure from Kilro, the assembled members of the anti-Guhl faction had been looking very pale, but Nabarl's own complexion was every bit as bad as theirs. While getting ever closer to where Emperor Guhl Mephius was, he looked as though he might swoon at any moment.

W-What should I do? He kept asking himself over and over.

The journey by air carrier had been like the very road to the scaffold, or to the gladiator arena where flesh-eating dragons awaited. He was as nervous as a cornered beast, he screamed at the slave women who were helping him get ready, even though they had not done anything wrong, and swung his fists at them. There was a side to him which had always held women in contempt.

Now that he had arrived in Solon, he still had no clear answer. Just as Fedom and the others had feared, he had considered confessing all the information he had about them and saving only his own skin from punishment.

But... would the Emperor even let me off the hook with just that?

After having first been tortured and made to cough up everything he knew, his people and his property might be seized, and his very House destroyed. Nabarl was portly for a soldier and, partly because of that, sweat was streaming endlessly down his forehead.

He was kept waiting, not in the great hall used for audiences, but in one of the rooms of the main palace that were reserved for the Emperor's private use.

It felt as to him as though his large body was wasting away with every passing minute.

Half an hour later, Guhl invited him in. A map was spread out on the desk before the Emperor. Next to him were gathered several men who served as his staff officers.

"I haven't summoned anyone else," Guhl began to talk.

"Aye," Nabarl's voice was hoarse as he answered.

"Nabarl."

"A-Aye."

"In the past, you always advocated seizing Taúlia by force and breaking free of the stalemate between the three central countries, did you not?"

Guhl brought out several documents. Before the start of the ten-year war with Garbera, Nabarl had certainly argued in favour of attacking Tauran, and he and his father had elaborated a strategy that they had sent to the Emperor. In the end, when the war with Garbera broke out, his opinion had been quelled.

"It was an argument made ten years ago, but a very interesting one. Here are the reports collating the information from the spies sent to the west. I will leave this to you. Work out a new strategy in cooperation with the staff officers."

"Ay... Ah?"

As he stood to attention, sweat was glistening all over Nabarl's brow. In front of him, Guhl smiled ominously.

"Still, we don't have that much time. We can wait no more than a week... You can do it, can't you?"

Part 3

Oubary Bilan's mansion had burned down...

A visitor arrived when he received that information. Noue Salzantes waved the hand he wore his lapis lazuli ring on and the messenger disappeared through another door as his new visitor entered the room.

"Did someone come?"

Zenon Owell, second prince of Garbera, entered the room and asked without any preliminary. Noue had slowly gotten used to this prince's personality, which was a perplexing mix of the brusqueness of a soldier who galloped through battlefields with the decorum and splendour of an aristocrat.

"It was no great matter, so I had him leave."

"Oh? It wouldn't have been a problem to keep me waiting."

Noue and Zenon. Once upon a time, they would never even have been seen together at the palace. As for being close enough to come and go from each other's private chambers? Well, those who knew them best were the most astounded at the abrupt change. Zenon had disliked Noue enough to publicly declare that the other's ingenuity was contrary to the path of chivalry; while Noue, although never openly arguing with Zenon, his social superior, had always had a sardonic gleam in his eye and had clearly looked down on him.

When Lord Eric of Ende had surrounded Zaim Fortress, Noue and Zenon's actions had hindered one another. Their thoughts and intentions had been at odds with each other and, because of that, Zenon had, in very little time, almost been captured by the enemy. Had Imperial Prince Gil of Mephius not arrived with reinforcements, that would certainly have been his fate.

However, it was precisely because they had fallen into that predicament that the two of them had repented their own over-confidence and come to

recognise the other's skill.

For a while, the two of them made idle conversation. The tea which was brought in had been chilled to Noue's liking. Garbera, which made vigorous use of air carriers, possessed a cave in a land across the northern sea in which they stored ice shaved from the perpetually snow-capped mountains there. Several times a year, that ice was sold at high price on the markets. Although Noue was known as a dandy, his room was furnished very simply, and he preferred not to spend too much money on his private life. This was one of the few luxuries that he enjoyed.

"It looks like Mephius still hasn't held Prince Gil's funeral," Zenon broached the main topic. "And because of that, we can't push to take Vileena back. What's Emperor Guhl hesitating for? I've heard one opinion that he can't accept his son's death and is escaping into the arms of religion, but I can't believe that the opponent we fought in the ten-year war would be that feeble-minded."

"Guhl is already at an advanced age. His first-born son, Gil Mephius, was his long-awaited heir, so it would not be surprising if his love for him ran deep. However..."

"However?"

"According to most of the stories I heard at court, it seems that Prince Gil was, on the contrary, ostracised by his father. Even after he officially became crown prince at thirteen, Guhl was known to remark that if there were a boy with more talent, even if he was only distantly related to the imperial family, he – Guhl – would not hesitate to overturn his son's position."

"Hmm," Zenon brushed back his soft platinum hair, which was so like his sister's, "I'd also heard rumours that Prince Gil was a 'fool'. It was to the point that most of our Garberan knights hoped that when he inherited the throne, it would weaken Mephius."

"I too was a little negligent because of those rumours."

Noue's words verged on the dangerous. He had, completely of his own initiative, taken advantage of Mephius' Founding Festival to try and weaken the country. Because of Prince Gil it had resulted in failure but, at the time, Noue had also attempted to bring about the assassination of Garbera's princess – in

other words, of Zenon's own little sister.

His actions had been dictated by the belief that this was for the good of Garbera, but even so, Noue questioned whether he would be able to implement the same plan as he was now. *Have I gone soft? No, it's just that since the Princess is loved that much throughout the country, I believe that there are other ways of using her.*

Trust and bonds between people were nothing to make light of. Noue believed that he himself was lacking in that area; so Zenon and Vileena, who could well be called unifying forces, were essential to Garbera, as well as to Noue himself.

Zenon, meanwhile, assumed that Noue had been "negligent" in a general sense. Thinking back to the three-way meeting near Zaim between Gil, Eric, and himself; and remembering the Mephian prince's demeanour, he gave a single nod.

"I thought back then that the rumours were wrong. It's mortifying to admit, but there's no denying that young prince was the one who set the pace of the meeting from start to end. Rather than being on bad terms with his father, could it be that Guhl was afraid of his son's competence?"

"There are reports that he warned the Prince against sending reinforcements to Garbera. It's entirely natural that a policymaker would not appreciate someone who ignores them and who stands out as a hero. To make things worse, it was the son of his own blood and the heir to the throne. And the Emperor is still passionately attached to power..."

"It's a situation that would probably be more dangerous than it is now if Gil were still alive." Zenon shrugged helplessly then glared at the empty space. "Well, things are currently dangerous enough in Mephius as it is. We can't leave Vileena over there; but, having said that, if we look like we're trying to take her back by force, sparks might also land on Garbera. When there's trouble inside a country, it's easy to point the tip of the spear towards another power. When there's a foreign enemy, allies have no choice but to band together."

Zenon had also heard that the emperor of Mephius was trying to draw closer to Ende. Actually, Eric himself had implied as much during their three-way

meeting. And when he had been informed that his older brother, Lord Jeremie, seemed also to have forged a connection with Mephius' emperor through a different route, the colour had completely drained from Eric's face.

Ende had its own internal problems. But, well, it could not be said that Garbera formed a unified block either.

"What have your brother and His Majesty said concerning what will happen to the Princess?"

"They're being indecisive," Zenon grimaced, looking as though he felt personally disgraced. "All we can do for now is wait, we don't yet know what will happen to the alliance with Mephius – that sort of thing. All I wanted was even one single firm statement that could unite the country."

To Zenon's chagrin, the situation within the country was once more growing unstable.

Prince Gil's death had caused a split in public opinion. Those who had been less than pleased about the alliance with Mephius were actively starting to talk about how fortuitous the Crown Prince's death was, saying that they should get the Princess returned to them and then settle things with Mephius. According to them, now that Ende was politically unstable, the time was ripe. Those who spoke that way were mostly Ryucown's adherents. His uprising at Zaim Fortress still exercised a huge influence amongst the knights of Garbera, it was starting to openly be said that he should be honoured for having chivalrously died for his country. Needless to say, Ryucown was a traitor and a rebel, so this was a sign that the royal family's prestige was declining. The situation might become a trigger to mayhem, but the two of them deliberately avoided touching upon it.

"Still, my poor little sister," Zenon sighed. "People talk about the fate of a woman born in turbulent times, but she's only a young girl and she's been tossed about by fortune every which way."

Thinking about it, the family that Vileena was to marry into had twice been changed in less than a year.

First, it had been the engagement to Ryucown, which had been decided a year ago. Noue was the one who had laid the groundwork for it, and Zenon had approved of it. However, King Ainn Owell of Garbera had sought to draw closer

to Ende as he urgently needed to form a military alliance with them; and so, behind the scenes, he had first persuaded Ryucown and Zenon to agree, and then had started preparations for Vileena to marry Lord Eric of Ende.

However, just as that was happening, they received an offer of peace from Mephius. The negotiations with Ende had been unofficial, so, after some agonising, Ainn Owell had chosen the alliance with Mephius. The family she was to marry into had been changed again and again, without any account being given to her own desires, then, when it had finally been settled on Mephius, Crown Prince Gil had passed away. Even Noue felt a certain compassion for her. In spite of those feelings however, Noue considered Vileena's current circumstances with a cool head. He had heard that in Mephius, opinions were divided about how to deal with her.

It's possible that by not holding the Prince's funeral, the Emperor is, in fact, actively trying to induce the Princess to stay – was how he saw things. The Emperor might be planning some kind of large-scale action in the near future, and was deliberately keeping Vileena in Mephius so that Garbera would not be able to intervene.

While on the one hand paying close attention to what was going on in Mephius, he also had to keep an eye on the interior situation in Garbera.

I pushed Ryucown forward as a hero while he was alive, so it's not as though I'm without responsibility in this matter. Should I go and meet his adherents directly?

Noue did not have much confidence in his ability to persuade people, but they could not be allowed to stage a confrontation with the royal family, and neither could he leave this to Zenon, who was himself royalty.

"You will soon be returning to Mavant?"

"Yeah. I want to re-organise the Order. A lot of the guys from my unit are stationed in Mavant, so there are plenty of people that I want to see again, since it's been so long."

Zenon being Zenon, he well understood that with Prince Gil's death, the relationship between the three countries might once more tear at the seams and collapse. So he would be concentrating his efforts on making preparations.

“Before that, I’m afraid I need to go show myself at the Kotjun House.”

“That...”

Noue just gave a faint smile and refrained from offering his condolences. The Kotjun House was an influential aristocratic family within Garbera but, because of their origins, they were often scorned behind their backs as “the Moneylending House”. Zenon in particular had always kept his distance from them.

“Please give my regards to Miss Rinoa Kotjun.”

“What? I was planning to take you along. You’ll do it much more smoothly than me.”

“Miss Rinoa dislikes me. Probably for the same reason that a certain prince used to.”

His blunt words made Zenon laugh. The tea was going entirely cold.

Chapter 3: The Hero, Afterwards

Part 1

“You wouldn’t know where that kid’s gone to, would you?”

Gilliam, the one being addressed, already had a face that was flushed bright red. He had been in an excellent mood up until right that moment, but when he glanced at the person who had called out to him, for some reason, his expression turned awkward for a second.

“Oh, Shique. How about a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

They were on the first floor of an inn on Eimen’s central avenue. Gilliam was surrounded by Zerdians. At their entreaty, he had been passionately describing the fight that had taken place there, in Eimen. After all, he was a member of Orba’s unit, the one which had killed Garda. As soon as they saw him, there were any number of Zerdians who invited him for drinks. While being praised to the skies as a hero, with drink after drink being pressed onto him, Gilliam proudly told feats of courage that were no more than half-exaggerated.

Shique whispered stealthily into Gilliam’s ear.

“Don’t go on too much of a spree. Not all Zerdians have started liking Mephians. One bad move and you might find yourself stabbed in the back in a fit of jealousy.”

“I know. Which is actually exactly why I *should* go on a spree. Being sullen just earns you dislike.”

“I see. There’s that way of looking at it too,” Shique looked around at the Zerdians whose faces were every bit as ruddy as Gilliam’s. “More importantly, do you know where that kid is? I haven’t seen him since last night.”

“Who knows? Maybe he got invited by some big shots? He’s the one who killed Garda, after all. He’s bound to be in much bigger demand than we are.”

Gilliam was unusually glib. The nape of his neck was covered in innumerable beads of sweat.

“Right.” With that, Shique was about to leave the inn. When suddenly –

“Ah, eh? Sir Shique from Orba’s unit...”

“Sir Shique, where are you going?”

The good-looking user of twin blades was popular among Zerdian women. This was a region which by nature had no love for effeminate young men but, once he became known as a hero, that particularity served instead to highlight his exoticism, and those who were easily influenced by fads apparently saw him as something fresh and new.

Normally, Shique would have driven them away for being annoying, but, as he himself had just said, there was the issue of national feeling. Showering them all with his very best smile, he left hurriedly. With the crisis averted for now, Gilliam wiped the beer froth from his moustache. He turned to Talcott, a mercenary from the same unit who was sitting beside him.

“Well, better watch out, Talcott. If he finds out what we did to the boy, he might just be the one to stab us in a frenzy.”

After Eimen had fallen to Garda, the men had been conscripted as soldiers and most of the women and children had been imprisoned as hostages. When Garda was killed, the royal family, which had been taken to Zer Illias, returned, but the granaries were empty and the economy was at a standstill. Since even the half-grown crops had been harvested from the farms, the prospects for reconstruction were not particularly good.

Yet a great many soldiers were currently gathered there. Although the allied

western forces, which had defeated Garda, had sent half of their troops home; the remaining half was still stationed in Eimen. Kings and lords from every country also remained, negotiating day after day about what to do from thereon.

On the orders of these statesmen, provisions and alcohol were being sent to Eimen from all over. Funds had also been collected in each country so that they could resume trade with the north as soon as Garda was defeated. So far, about half of the profits of all that had found their way to Eimen.

Where people gather, merchants follow. Barriers and check-points currently had no meaning in the west, nor were tolls being imposed to cross national borders. And with what little funds and goods they had on hand, the local people too were indomitably re-opening for business.

It hadn't even been a week since Garda was killed, and the west was enjoying an unusually peaceful period, in which no blood wafted on the sand-laden wind. Amidst that –

“I’m going back. You lot do whatever you want.”

“Nah-ah, we’re not letting you do that tonight, Captain.”

This was the previous evening. Gilliam and Talcott, who had been drinking heavily that day too, were on either side of a third man, trapping him between them. Wearing a mask and slenderly-built for a warrior, that man was attracting the gazes of the passers-by. None of them needed to be told that this was ‘Ax’s swordsman’, the one who had killed Garda – Orba.

The three of them were standing in front of the impressive gates to a building. It had once been a merchant’s mansion, but since it became vacant after its owner was killed by Garda, Zerdian pimps had pooled their resources to buy it, and it was now a house in which prostitutes received guests.

Gripping Orba’s arm, Talcott launched proudly into a lecture.

“In Tauran, prostitutes who also work as dancers are known as dancing girls. Their status is way above that of normal whores, you know? They’ve had the foundations of etiquette and the performing arts hammered into them. They’re proud and haughty, and they don’t particularly try to flatter guests. The

opposite, in fact: they'll drive out any guest they don't like. Some of them have been bought out of service by royalty, and there are even cases of them becoming queens. For Zerdian 'connoisseurs', you become a man by having a good time with dancing girls."

"Yeah, so what?"

"So, Captain, you're going to be having a good time too," Gilliam brought his ruddy face nearer to Orba's, his breath reeking of alcohol. "Don't worry, everything's been taken care of beforehand. If Orba himself visits the joint, its status will really go up, so we've been told that going there will be practically for free."

"Why would I?"

Orba struggled to break free from their grip. His feet were almost treading the air. When he commanded his military unit, he was – partly thanks to the mask – enveloped in an aura that made it hard to tell what his age was. Right then, however, he seemed entirely like a sixteen, seventeen-year-old boy. Among the people who were peering attentively at him, wondering if this was the famous Orba, there were quite a few who gave up and left, deciding that "he's just a show-off impostor who's wearing the same mask."

Gilliam smirked.

"You're not *not* interested in women, right?"

"Why would I feel like doing anything with a woman I'm meeting for the first time?"

"That's seriously strange," Talcott stared narrowly at Orba. "It's *because* it's the first time meeting them, and you're paying them, that there won't be any future complications. Living for love is fine: polishing your skill with women during your spare time is what makes you a real man-about-town."

"Let go."

"Now, now... look here, Captain. This is both for your sake and for ours as former inhabitants of a foreign country."

"What?"

While Orba looked about ready to bite at any moment, Gillian embarked on an explanation.

“A masked hero might sound mysterious in a legend, but when it comes to reality, it’s just fishy.”

“ ... ”

“And on top of that, even though everyone’s praising you to the sky and back, you’re the kind of straight-laced guy who sits there looking gloomy, doesn’t go drinking with anyone, and doesn’t go and have fun with women; so there’s going to be plenty of jealous guys out there who are going to start being suspicious of you, wondering if there isn’t something up with you. ‘Really, that guy managed to do what we couldn’t... so yeah, sure, he’s incredible, but that’s why he’s looking down on us Zerdians and we really hate it’, is what they’ll be thinking.”

“Dancing girls come in five different ranks,” Talcott chimed in as Orba started to stop resisting. “Among those, choose one who’s from the middle rank, and who Zerdians would rate last for looks, to play around with. ‘Whaat? Mephian tastes sure are weird, huh?’ is what you want to get them to think. And just from that, they’ll start feeling much closer to you.”

“If you don’t like it, make yourself look more cheerful. Drink plenty. Try to show yourself being scolded by Ax for going on a spree. Me, I figure that’d be way more difficult for you.”

Orba did not protest and stopped struggling and kicking. Seizing their chance, Gilliam and Talcott, looking like they were half pushing him, entered the establishment. No sooner had they taken a single step indoors that they heard the reedy sound of a flute.

We did it – the two of them exchanged winks behind Orba’s back.

From the start, they had an agreement with the owner that if they managed to bring Orba, they could get in for free; so that previous long-winded reason was something that had been added afterwards. “Shall we take him by force?” Gilliam had suggested, but Talcott had shaken his head.

“That capt’n of ours, he looks like he’s a real hard nut to crack, but actually, it

seems to me that he's as simple as can be. You leave it to me. This is what I'm best at."

Talcott was the one who had come up with the argument to persuade Orba, but since it would have been lacking in credibility coming from him, he left the actual coaxing to Gilliam. For that sort of thing, he knew himself well. After all, according to him, "a man of shallow relationships never finds love", and there was a part of him that believed that women partners were special.

Stepping further in, they found several dancing girls whose naked bodies were covered in only the thinnest of clothing. In the dim light, several brown-skinned shapes drifted, dancing sometimes fiercely, sometimes gently to the sound of pipes. There was something uncanny about it, creating the illusion that one had strayed into another world.

The guests who were watching them seemed to be choosing their partners as they drank. However, as Gilliam had said, there were several ranks of dancing girls, and those in the higher ranks could decline invitations. That was especially true if it was a first-time customer. If a guest wanted a dancing girl to remember his face, he needed to pay frequent visits; and to attract her attention, he needed to prepare a wealth of gifts and topics of conversations.

Pledging an oath to a high-ranked dancing girl was a mark of status among Zerdian men, so they were not looking only for a single night's pleasure and the competition could be fierce.

Orba, as had been suggested, headed for the area with the mid-rank dancing girls – known as the 'flower rank'. Inside the room, the smell of cosmetics and perfume was almost offensively strong.

The Orba had come, and for a moment, the women almost stopped moving. Feelings of indefinable nervousness and elation ran through them. Although the well-trained women immediately resumed airily dancing in a circle, they did not forget to keep their gazes glued to that mask.

Orba sat on the floor along with the other men. While pretending to drink, he visually compared the women to each other. Gilliam had said to choose a woman that Zerdians would not consider good-looking, but – *Damn it, I really don't get Zerdian tastes.* The dancing girls characteristically wore gaudy

makeup, so he couldn't help but think that they all looked the same.

The music that was playing sounded like a soft breeze.

The women formed a circle and, as though gazing longingly at an invisible moon, they all simultaneously stroked the empty air with their smooth arms. Just when each one of their fingers was about to brush the floor, the music abruptly changed and grew ferocious. All of a sudden, the women were clasping short swords in both hands. This time, it was a battle dance. Their long, supple legs nimbly changed position and intersected with those of the dancing girls on either side of them. The short swords clashed in mid-air, their thighs brushed against one another, then they swapped places two-by-two and challenged the next girl.

The dancing itself was well-worth seeing, but – *This is stupid* – Orba irritably shifted the position of his legs time and time again.

What Gilliam and Talcott had said was true... It was because he thought so that Orba had entered the establishment. Even though ingratiating himself with people was not his strong point, given that his position was now one that attracted attention, he was perfectly well aware that it meant he might also attract lethal animosity.

When he had been acting as Mephius' Crown Prince Gil, he had been able to pull that kind of thing off reasonably well. He had been quite proud of perhaps having a talent for acting, but still, Orba had originally been no more than a sword slave. The role of "prince" was so disconnected from his reality that, conversely, it was for that very reason that he was able to treat it as performing a part in a play and pull it off.

In that respect, the role of "hero" was pretty tough. Besides the fact that the expectations of all those eyes fixed on him felt different, this time, he was not acting the part of someone with a different name and personality. On top of that, there was the issue between Zerdians and Mephians. Orba predicted that if he took the wrong attitude, then far from being a hero, he would become a target of hatred. Which was the only reason why he had, for the time being, gone along with Gilliam and Talcott's forceful invitation.

Fine. Screw this. I'll think of a different way – he decided, and started to stand

up.

It was at that moment that one of the dancers fell against him. She had tripped.

The tip of her short sword plunged towards Orba's mask. The surroundings broke out into unconscious screams but Orba, swiftly raising his hands, caught the woman's wrist in one of them, and easily propped her by the waist with the other.

Looking at her from close up, she was a girl whose eyes were large – or rather, slightly too large. While he was staring straight at the girl whose large eyes were blinking, a middle-aged woman who seemed to be the leader of the dancing girls came rushing and apologised to him. After which, she looked towards the dancing girl with an expression like that of an ogre.

“Yāni! When am I going to actually be able to rely you?”

“I-I'm sorry, Elder Sister. I got distracted.”

“You got distracted? A dancing girl in the middle of a dance? Well that's a great excuse, isn't it?”

The woman wasn't making excuses in any real meaning of the sense. Orba had seen the whole thing from start to finish and, actually, the girl called Yāni was not at fault. It was the dancer behind her who had been paying too much attention to him and who had had collided with her. That dancer seemed to be younger, looking like she was still in her late teens. Her face was pale under her makeup, probably because she was afraid that the brunt of the anger would be turned against her.

Orbas' chest squeezed tight.

In the distant future, Yāni's fellow dancers would all agree that “Yāni did really well.”

“Honoured Guest, you're pretty strange.”

In the room they had taken on the second floor, Orba and Yāni were drinking, sitting face-to-face. The sweat that clung to their skin was what remained of

their shared warmth.

“That right?”

“Why did you choose me? There are plenty of girls who are more beautiful and better dancers than me.”

“Heh.”

Valued and unexpected guest though he was, Yāni was starting to find him a little hard-going. Sipping his drink like he was licking it, he did not join in on any of the topics of conversation that she brought up and he tended to keep his eyes lowered.

What dancing girls hated most were men who openly turned cold after having finished making love. If his partner had not been Yāni, some pretty awful rumours might have started circulating about Orba. She was twenty-five, however, and had experience. And because of that, as she spotted that the nape of his neck was red, she realised that – *He’s embarrassed*. He probably didn’t have much experience in playing around.

He’s like Dad.

She could hardly remember ever seeing her stalwart and taciturn father laughing cheerfully. Although that didn’t mean that he had always been in a bad mood. When Yāni’s sister, who was five years older than her, had gotten married, her father had acted very unusually: drinking wine, singing in public, laughing, and then crying in secret.

Six years ago, when a skirmish had broken out with a neighbouring city-state, her father had been drafted as a soldier, and had never returned. Yāni had applied to become a dancing girl the following year. To fill the silence that had sprung up between her and Orba, Yāni started singing. Afterwards, she performed on a fife. For a while, a lithe and emotion-filled melody sounded. It was the flute that Orba showed the greatest interest in.

“Can all dancing girls play the flute?”

“All Zerdian women are good at it. It’s one of the must-have accomplishments. Although, they are not usually as good at it as I am.”

“Oh.”

The fifes of western Tauran were one of the more popular items of trade with the north. Since it looked like Orba was interested in it, after playing a few more tunes, she said –

“If you want, I could have one made for you. There are craftsmen who specialise in making flutes for us dancing girls.”

“Then, could you have one, no, two made?”

Yāni smiled and looked into Orba’s eyes behind the mask.

“That might cause unnecessary trouble. If they’re souvenirs from Tauran for women, I think it would be best to give something different to both of them.”

When she said that, Orba blushed again.

And that was the reason why Orba went there the second day. In order to give specifications on the design of the flute, he asked Talcott, who was good at drawing, to sketch it. Orba had been prepared for over-the-top teasing, but Talcott had a certain stoicism when it came to his own areas of expertise. A few hours after he had received the request, he had already completed several designs.

“Is there anything that you want included?” Talcott had asked, looking a little anxious, and Orba had found that side to him somewhat surprising.

Having chosen two of the designs, Orba had brought them to Yāni, intending to excuse himself afterwards, but, in the end, he had slept with her for a second day.

He had almost begun to forget the warmth of physical contact.

Orba had changed from when he had lived only for revenge. Now that the fight against Garda was over, his time was unexpectedly hard to fill. Yet it was not out of listlessness. It was just that Orba, who had had his eyes firmly fixed on the next step, then on the step after that of the staircase he was climbing, was taking a few moments to look at something other than where to place his feet before taking that next stair.

For a short while, he was embraced by a woman's skin. He was, after all, a teenage boy.

When, five days later, he went to visit for the third time, rumours were going around.

"It looks like the hero fancies Yāni."

"He's a little weird, I mean, he could have had a better woman."

While he did feel embarrassed, this *had* after all been one of his aims. *Say whatever you want* – he thought, blushing to the tip of his ears at the various rumours, as he entered the building to receive the flutes from Yāni.

The night had grown late.

"When I took your hand..."

"Yes?" Yāni turned around while she was tying up her hair. Her naked shoulder was smooth and round.

"When I came here... the first time I took your hand, it was because the smell of perfume wasn't so strong."

Yāni was a perceptive woman. She realised that, several days after she had asked it, Orba was answering her question of "why did you chose me?"

She laughed, her eyes creased half-closed.

Part 2

When he received the report, Ax's first thought was – *is he trying to run away?*

It concerned Orba, the hero who had slayed Garda, and Ax did not know what to make of the timing. He had spent entire days and nights in meetings. He had been so busy, it made his eyes spin, but, just when he had finally reached a point where he could take a break and had been thinking of sending for the hero so they could have a drink together –

“A messenger came from Sir Orba saying that he would like to return to Taúlia. However, since you were so busy, Lord Ax, he said to let you know once things had calmed down. He probably left Eimen yesterday.”

“Why Taúlia?”

“He said that since he stood out too much here, he could not do anything. The west is still in turmoil, and there is no knowing who might aim for it, thus he wished to immediately go and take part in defending Taúlia.”

Humph – snorted the lord of Taúlia with a noncommittal expression.

Ax had naturally received news of the attempted uprising in Taúlia. During the time when he had been approaching Eimen with the allied western forces that he had gathered together, Ax's nephew, Raswan Bazgan, had seized control of Taúlia Castle through armed force. Apparently, many of the soldiers employed by Ax's younger brother, Toún, had joined Raswan's side. During the crisis, Archduke Hirgo Tedos, who had counselled the Bazgan House since the time of Ax's father, had been put to the sword.

Ax had heard that the ones who had put down the rebellion were, firstly, Hirgo's adopted son, Bouwen Tedos, the only man currently in Taúlia other than Toún who carried the title of “general”, and secondly, none other than Ax's own daughter, Esmena Bazgan.

What's with this unbelievable story all of a sudden...

It was exactly like something out of an old tale, and Ax still couldn't quite feel that it was real.

Raswan had based the justice of his rebellion on the claim that Ax had lost the sovereign's seal of the Ancient Dynasty to Mephius. Which was a perfectly true, so for Ax, the fact that Esmena herself had brandished the sovereign's seal and rallied the troops' morale was possibly even more of a bolt out of the blue than it had been for his nephew.

Esmena had then been carried away, undercover of the mayhem from the rebellion, by one of Garda's subordinates, and had been brought here, to Eimen. Thus, the father and daughter had been reunited immediately after Garda had been subjugated. However, as she had still been under the influence of sorcery, her body and mind had both been utterly exhausted.

At one point, Ax had visited the pavilion in which she had been settled to rest.

"Father... this... The proof of friendship between Crown Prince Gil of Mephius and you, Father."

He had received the war fan from his daughter's hands, with the sovereign's seal of the Ancient Dynasty definitely stored inside it. It had, for a while, been taken by Mephius.

The father, worried about his daughter's health, had made use of an air carrier to send her back to Taúlia before him, and before getting the full details of the situation. The commander of the Third Army Corps, Nidhal, in whom he placed full confidence, had travelled with her, and had been given orders concerning getting Taúlia back on its feet after the rebellion.

"Have a two-day celebration in honour of our having subjugated Garda. It's fine if you hand out the wine and provisions at the castle. But that's it. Afterwards, the populace's rationing has to be the same as during wartime. After all, Taúlia's the land where trade with the north will be the slowest to get back on track."

Judging by the information, Orba's intention of returning to Taúlia to take up duty in its defence seemed absolutely admirable. The way Ax saw it, however,

was that *he's avoiding me questioning him.*

As long as he was just one mercenary, it didn't matter if he wore a mask or even if he had two faces, but of course, now that he was the hero with the greatest achievements, Ax's retainers – or rather, the entire west – had their eyes inquisitively fixed on what on earth might be under the mask, and speculation about his origins was rife.

Even for Ax, there were a lot of points worth thinking about.

I don't believe he's a mere gladiator. He seems to be used to ordering soldiers.

But for having met him in person, it was clear that he was very young. There were naturally not many social positions in which youths gave orders to soldiers.

Royalty or nobility.

Ax had been allocated a spacious room within Eimen's royal palace. There, he spent day after day in discussion with the kings and nobles of the surrounding countries. The flags of almost all of the city-states of Tauran were currently fluttering in the wind above the gates of Eimen. They had come to conclude a treaty of non-aggression, and also, for when trade resumed with the north, to explore a more efficient way of doing things, rather than everyone doing whatever they pleased as had been the case up until then. In its current state, if Tauran did not hurry to revive its economy and rebuild itself, it ran the risk of becoming bait for wolves hungering for blood.

If he were Zerdian, I could believe that he was a young prince or noble who had lost his country and who was hiding his status by working as a mercenary on foreign soil, but that guy says himself that he's Mephian, and even if that isn't true, at the very least, he isn't Zerdian.

"Huum."

Ax had an attendant help him change his clothes, then sat down with a thump onto a couch by the window.

Whatever the case, leaving him to his own devices is dangerous.

For a while, he was absorbed in thought, but, by nature, he was not one to

ponder too deeply over things by himself. Speed of action was Ax's strong point, and he promptly summoned Natokk, the commander of the Sixth Army Corps, to his room.

He ordered Natokk to take fifty soldiers and return to Taúlia. The reason was not only for the defence of their home country, as he gave him one other order:

“Have your men keep watch on Orba. If it looks as though Master Ravan has recovered, consult with him. In other words, do not reveal this order except to the old master and to your most trusted subordinates.”

“Aye,” Natokk did not have a moment's hesitation, and nodded at once.

Ax had chosen Natokk because of his steady personality, with no other intention in mind. At the time, he did not know about the rumours whispered among some of the soldiers concerning Orba's real identity. Such detailed information-gathering was the strategist Ravan Dol's job, but even if Ravan himself had been there, and even if he had that information at hand, he too would probably still have given the same order to the same person.

In other words, although it was purely coincidental, Ax's decision in choosing Natokk was the correct one. But it would need quite some more time before anyone could tell whether that decision was lucky or unlucky for Tauran's future.

A column of horses was advancing along the highways which had been maintained since the era of Zer Tauran.

Although many things were now different from before, as long as they stuck to it, the mercenaries did not need to worry about attacks from bandits taking advantage of the chaos. After going south from Eimen for a few days, they arrived in sight of Lake Soma and also spotted soldiers from Helio and Cherek who were guarding the highway.

Throughout the journey, Gilliam had constantly felt eyes drilling into his back.

In a sense, Shique's insistent gaze was far more terrifying than any bandit. The rumour that Orba was crazy for a dancing girl called Yāni had, of course, reached Shique's ears. And he had immediately guessed that Gilliam and Talcott

were behind it.

Naturally, Gilliam had desperately explained the reasoning that he had given to Orba himself. Shique had not given any indication that he agreed with it, and, since then, he had barely said a word.

He might just really be aiming for my back.

Even Gilliam, a long-serving gladiator, could not help breaking out into a cold sweat. However –

“It looks like you also understand pretty well.”

Shique spoke to him at a rest area for travellers on the shore of Lake Soma.

“W-What do I understand?”

“How to handle that kid.” Sending a sidelong glance towards the timid-acting Gilliam, Shique gazed disinterestedly at the horses that were gobbling down their fodder. “He gets belligerent if you try to appeal to his emotions. But if you reason with him with logic, he’ll listen surprisingly well. It’s probably because he’s aware of his own lack of experience.”

“Isn’t it a bit much, though? Needing reasons laid out one-by-one just to sleep with a woman... you know?”

Gilliam turned away under Shique’s fixed stare.

“Well, leave it. In this case, it’s definitely helped the Zerdians sort out some of the complicated feelings they have towards Orba. Still, when it comes to that kid, don’t go doing things behind my back.”

This guy really is like a nanny.

Reading the expression on his long-time acquaintance’s face, Shique gave a small laugh.

“You know, I’m not going to get angry at Orba having slept with a woman. Well, maybe a little bit, but compared to how angry I am at you acting in secret like that, it’s nothing.”

“O-Oh...”

“Hmm, how can I put this? I’m actually rather glad.”

“Glad?”

“That kid is finally releasing himself from the shackles of revenge. It feels like, little by little, we’ll be seeing Orba’s real face. That’ll be a rare pleasure indeed.”

Gilliam didn’t understand where the pleasure in that was at all, but he was not foolish enough to contradict him.



Incidentally, Orba, who was leading the fifty-odd mercenaries, had removed his mask in favour of bandages wrapped around his face, just as when he had first arrived in Tauran. Everyone throughout the west now knew of the masked swordsman Orba, and his group received a warm welcome wherever they went. Since his men enjoyed it, Orba had, at first, reluctantly borne with it but, in the end, he had not been able to put up with it and had decided to go back to bandages.

“We’ll be leaving soon,” Orba announced to the soldiers, Gilliam and Shique among them.

“What, again?” Talcott, who had been chatting with a young woman who worked at the rest area, dragged himself to his feet, looking thoroughly fed up. “What’s with the lightning trip? Can’t we just take it a bit easier?”

“There’s no reason not to hurry. Come on, on your horses,” Orba said curtly. It was only after saying so though that he noticed something.

Hurry? ... Right, I’m in a hurry.

He had to admit that his mind was filled with something like impatience. There was no concrete or imminent threat, but he had the feeling that ever since he had defeated Garda, he had been thinking that – *I need to get moving soon.*

Orba had achieved success and gained fame. He had even reached the position of “hero” that he had yearned for since childhood. And yet, his mood was no brighter. There were plenty of reasons for that: he could no longer triumphantly return to his home village, he could not escape the hassle of having to hide his face, and he had the feeling that he was always running away from something.

Is he trying to run away? – Ax’s intuition was not entirely wrong. Orba had been afraid that he might press him to reveal his face.

And, what part of that is being a hero?

The guards on either side of the highway waved at them, while Talcott and Shique waved back. Even though they didn’t recognise him as the masked hero, Orba was wearing Taúlian armour, so they probably viewed the riders as

comrades.

So, what will I do next?

Orba had questioned himself thus just before leaving Eimen. Should he nonchalantly return to Taúlia, or visit the northern coastal countries, or go further west and cross the desert? The possibilities were endless.

No...

Every time he thought about such things, however, something seemed to press heavily against his chest. Those obstructive, unnameable feelings spread to his heart and blocked those future possibilities. Thoughts of his fights in the west flitted through his mind. The moment when he confronted Garda in the temple at Eimen. And also –

Are you running away?

Are you leaving us behind?

Are you planning on abandoning us and running away?

– All the screams of the dead within the overflowing darkness created by Garda's sorcery. At one point, it had almost brought him to his knees. Surrounded – or perhaps captured – by faces from the past, he had almost abandoned himself to them, even as his mind and body dissolved.

When he shook *that* off, Orba had personally removed his mask. Only in that one moment had he felt that he could see a bright path to the future. Not the future that Tauran could hope for once Garda was destroyed, but a future for himself, and for Mephius, where he had once overcome so many bitter hardships as the crown prince.

But the reality was that his face was still hidden, and that he was spurring his horse further and further along the highway, where the wind-tossed sand whirled and where what lay ahead could not be seen. It was simply that he also had the idea that, *if I return to Taúlia*, he might hear about how things were in Mephius.

In Mephius, revenge had been everything to Orba. He had lived only for revenge and revenge had kept him alive, revenge had shaped his personality,

and revenge had guided him. There could be no fond memories for him to want to look back on. Nevertheless, now that he was freed from the shackles of revenge, it was true that he felt like he was looking at Mephius differently from how he had until then.

Naturally, for Orba, the word “Mephius” did not exist all by itself: any number of names and faces were attached to it. There was Guhl, its policymaker, and men of influence such as Simon or Rogue. There were also his one-time companions, such as Gowen, Hou Ran, or Pashir.

And also, among the many faces that went with “Mephius” was that of Vileena Owell. The girl who was not of “Mephius”, but who had tried so hard to become a part of it. As her smile floated into his mind, a dull pain ran through Orba’s chest.

When he had left Mephius, Orba had had no choice but to fake Prince Gil’s death. The price to pay had been a great many separations. In that situation, he had been able to neither explain the circumstances to Vileena, nor, of course, to make his farewells to her.

After coming to the western lands, he had unexpectedly met again with a different princess. Esmena Bazgan of Taúlia. A girl that he had only met twice as Gil Mephius. Esmena’s haggard face was still seared into Orba’s mind.

Vileena Owell...

Even if he tried not to think about it, her name resurfaced. Now that her fiancé was dead, what kind of life was she living in Mephius? The question filled his mind. More than that, what expression was she making, what tone of voice was she speaking in, what where her steps when she walked?

Stupid. Gil’s dead, so she has no more reason to stay in Mephius. She must have gone back to Garbera.

As though ashamed of them, Orba had repeatedly reconsidered his plans, but, as Talcott had pointed out, he had to recognise that he was feeling a certain impatience.

The skies were clear.

Over the reddish-brown earth was superimposed the landscape of another

country, one that he had not seen. Flowers swayed in the wind and the sky stretched out blue. A single airship was soaring through it. Her platinum-blond hair fluttering, a girl was dancing lightly in the skies of her native land.

Has she gotten her wings back?

Orba looked up and the illusion disappeared, taken by the wind that had been blowing since earlier.

Part 3

Nedain was roughly halfway between Birac and Solon. It had a fortress defended by a ravine and, like other forts in Mephius, a small town was attached to it.

At first, it had been no more than an air carrier relay base between the commercial city of Birac and the imperial capital, Solon. It was a vestige from when there had still been trade with the west but, as this had died out about two hundred years earlier, there had been plans, at one time, to demolish the base and instead construct a port north of Birac, in a location on the other side of the river that would be more convenient for trade with the north.

Just when that plan was first being put into effect, however, far to the north, across the mountains and near the Houlin Rifts, from the city-state of Io, where it was said that they worshipped a beast-headed god, a group of fanatics crossed over the river and started marching south. In Mephius, there was urgent need to expand bases into fortresses, and that's when the foundations of the current Nedain were laid.

Three generations prior to Guhl, the area of the Vlad Plateau had been seized by a powerful local clan, so, along with Solon and Idolo, Nedain had served to warn off enemies in three directions and halt their advance. Additionally, the elders of the Dragon Gods' faith, who had been in charge of rites since back in those days, had declared that there were "evil portents" immediately to the east of Birac. In the end, and partly because forest resources were, after all, precious in that part of Mephius, the plans to construct the port were abandoned.

Which was how Nedain remained as a city connecting Birac and Solon. Although it had to be said that nowadays, since the Vlad Plateau had returned to Mephius, compared to the border-town of Apta or the flourishing trade-city of Birac, Nedain had a definite air of decline. Even in Mephius, which was widely

derided by other countries for being unrefined and lacking in culture, 'being from Nedain' was synonymous to 'country bumpkin'.

Moreover, it had only been about half a month ago that an entire village had been annihilated by the military troops for having sheltered a single slave. The fear that held the other villages in its grip had infected the town, and it felt as though a chillingly cold wind was blowing within the area that should have been sheltered by its high ramparts.

It was amidst that atmosphere that a certain piece of news arrived.

"Garbera's Princess Vileena is apparently going to be coming here."

Apart from the small gladiatorial arena at its outskirts, Nedain was not a place that had much in the way of entertainment, so the populace was rejoicing at the rumour.

"They say that her skin is incomparably fairer than any Mephian woman."

"But still, why's she coming to Nedain at a time like this?"

"It's gotta be because she wants to thank General Lord Saian for helping Garbera."

"There's that, sure, but I bet it's also a journey to help heal her grief."

The Garberan princess. Gil Mephius' fiancé?

Walking inside Nedain Fortress, the gladiator Pashir tried to recall what the princess looked like but, although he had seen her from a distance in Solon and Apta, he could not conjure up a complete image. All he could remember was the strength of her gaze.

Pashir had been a long-serving gladiator known as "Strong-Armed" and "Iron Arm". He had born a bitter grudge for having been made into a sword slave and separated from his younger sister, and had, at one time, devoted himself to trying to cast Mephius to the flames. But that attempted uprising had just been part of a plan by a man named Zaat Quark who had been plotting to seize power, and both had been foiled by Prince Gil Mephius.

Pashir should originally have been sentenced to execution, but Gil took him up and appointed him as commander of the infantry unit within the Crown

Prince's Imperial Guards. In Apta, he had taken part in the battles which had broken out with Taúlia, and after that, he had accumulated more feats of arms when he had travelled to Zaim Fortress as part of the Crown Prince's reinforcements to Garbera.

That prince – what kind of man is he?

Gil had used his subordinate, Orba, to trick Pashir, and had thwarted his revenge against Mephius. Pashir hated him enough to kill him, but, at the same time, he felt a powerful interest in the man who sometimes so completely betrayed the impression he had of nobles.

Might he be the kind who'll leave his name in history as a great man?

He had even gone so far as to believe that might be the case, but Gil had been shot right after returning to Apta, and had disappeared into the shadows that shrouded the River Yunos.

Pashir had of course been part of the search parties which had scoured the river's surroundings. He had been working with a hundred or so sword slaves who had decided to stay on as soldiers after achieving success in the battle at Apta, but, in the forest north of the Yunos, they had suddenly been called to halt by Gowen.

Gowen too had originally been thrust into the world of gladiators, and he had been leading a unit of about fifty Imperial Guards who shared the same history.

"It looks like the ones who shot the prince were Oubary's men from the Black Armour Division," he had said. It appeared that some of his own subordinates had spotted soldiers who wore the equipment of the Black Armour Division. "They probably plan to escape west. We're going to chase after them."

"Then we'll go t..." Pashir had started to say, but Gowen lifted up a hand to interrupt him. Hanging from that hand was a heavy-looking leather bag.

"You'll find your pay inside. The Prince gave it to me for safekeeping in case of an emergency. Distribute it among your men."

"What's this about?"

"Since he hasn't been found even with these searches, it's best to think that

the Prince is dead. We're the Imperial Guards who were supposed to protect him. Even if the ones behind this can be caught, we might get charged for failing our duty and be executed. Just like you lot, we used to be slaves that Mephius treated like animals. We served the Prince, but we've no intention to let Mephius or whoever chain us up again. So let's dissolve your unit, here and now."

At Gowen's words, the soldiers behind Pashir had started to make a stir. The tanned veteran continued,

"We have a debt towards the Prince. The least we can do is kill Oubary ourselves. Afterwards, we'll break up our unit too."

"Wait. In that case, until Oubary is killed, we'll..."

"They'll be sure to notice something if this many people close in on them. You lot leave. It's the only way to repay the favour to the Prince for looking out for us."

Pashir had stared intently at Gowen's stern expression. After that, once he had watched Gowen take his Imperial Guards through the forest on a path that would allow them to circumvent the Yunos by heading north, Pashir had left the coin-filled bag to his men.

"Pashir, what are you going to do?" asked Miguel Tes, one of the soldiers, on seeing that Pashir had not taken any of the money. He too was a former gladiator; in the gladiatorial tournament held during the country's Founding Festival, he had fought against the masked swordsman, Orba.

"I..." Pashir had not known how to answer.

There's something going on here. Gowen's behaviour was suspicious. They did not know each other particularly well, but he did not get the impression that Gowen was particularly good at lying. When their eyes had met, Gowen had looked away.

Prince Gil was a man who excelled at using tricks. During the battles at Apta, he had deceived even the soldiers who were supposed to be on his side. So perhaps... thought Pashir. Perhaps this might be another one of his schemes?

It was based on nothing except his intuition, but Pashir was unable to discard

that thought of his. He could not accept Prince Gil's death.

I won't believe it until I've seen the bastard's corpse. If this is another one of his tricks, it'd mean being tricked by him again. The bastard will be laughing at me again. No thanks, once was enough.

Looking back, he wasn't sure that, at the time, he had thought things out that specifically. Maybe he had just been latching onto any old reason and had just been convincing himself to Apta Fortress like a fool.

For some reason, Miguel went with him. He was a young man who had a carefree side to him and he seemed to find this development amusing.

The next morning, the Imperial Guards had also returned to Apta. But there was no more than a handful of them, including Gowen. While the soldiers who had come from the various towns to assist broke out into a commotion, they had gone up to them. Gowen's armour was splattered with what was clearly fresh blood; his breathing rough, and he told them about what had happened the previous evening.

Just as Gowen had predicted, they had discovered about a hundred soldiers from the Black Armour Division who were about to cross over the border into Tauran. Realising that they had been found out, instead of answering the questions that Gowen had fired at them, the soldiers had drawn their swords. Although words were no longer necessary: there was no longer any doubt that Oubary and his men had assassinated Prince Gil.

Swords and strength did the talking as they slaughtered each other. Most of those from the Black Armour Division, unwilling to foolishly lose their lives there, had attempted to flee, which allowed the Imperial Guards to put up a fight despite being outnumbered.

"We didn't quite make it," said Gowen, looking as though the thought made him want to cough up blood. At the end of a desperate fight in which most of the Imperial Guards had laid down their lives, they had succeeded in routing the Black Armour Division, but they had not been able to kill their leader, Oubary.

"He was badly wounded and, as far as I could see, he wasn't able to escape to Tauran. Please, blockade the borders at once and search inside the country. I won't be able to die easy until I've seen that bastard dead."

Pashir was standing some distance away when Gowen made that appeal, and he became more convinced than ever that something was up. Looking carefully, and for a swordsman of Pashir's calibre, it was clear that Gowen and the surviving Imperial Guards only had superficial injuries. They were pretending to have been doused in their opponents' blood, probably so that it would look like they had been in a gruesome fight.

Above all, there was the issue of the masked swordsman, Orba. He could not see him here, and neither had he seen him when they met in the forest. He was a man who was loyal to the Prince's orders. He had infiltrated the ranks of Pashir and his fellow conspirators, and had revealed their plans to rebel. If his identity had been discovered, he would have been killed on the spot. Yet the man who had taken on such a dangerous mission was now missing.

That guy's nothing short of a fiend. What's he plotting this time?

Thus, Pashir remained in Apta. Gowen seemed astounded that he had stayed, but he deliberately avoided saying anything about it. Pashir followed suit, and did not ask him anything. He reasoned that if there was some kind of plan, he wasn't going to be let in on it this late in the game.

Several days passed and, despite a large-scale search organised throughout the country, neither the Prince nor Oubary were found. In the end, they were temporarily called back to Solon to report on the results of their search and on what the situation had been just before the Prince was shot.

After a few more days, letters that the Prince had written beforehand were discovered. It seemed as though he had been intending to disband his Imperial Guards after the battle at Apta. He had written that, as heir to the throne, he intended to follow a "proper" line of conduct hereafter, and so was aware that he needed to rectify his decision to have former slaves as his Imperial Guards. This was accompanied by a request that when the time came, the former slaves be incorporated into General Rogue Saian's division.

It really is as though he'd planned everything out from the start – thought Pashir, and yet, at around the same time, the Emperor publicly announced that the position of crown prince had fallen empty. In other words, Prince Gil Mephius was officially proclaimed dead. As far as Pashir was concerned, if this

was also part of the plan, then the Prince's intentions were becoming more and more incomprehensible.

I don't get it. Or did he decide to throw everything away and escape from Mephius? Was he afraid of the Emperor's anger?

When his thoughts reached that point, the memory of how Gil had looked just before they went in reinforcement to Garbera floated to his mind. He seemed somehow lacking in spirit, as though he might disappear at any moment. And in actual fact, he had almost lost his life on the battlefield. And at that time...

"Master Pashir."

Pashir was surprised at the voice coming from the side. A young girl walked up to him.

"Are you worried about something?"

"Yeah... No, it's no big deal."

It was Mira. She had originally been a slave-girl working at the Solon colosseum, where she had looked after the gladiators. When Pashir and the others had been incorporated into the Imperial Guards, she too had been brought in to continue to take care of them.

Mira's expression clouded over. "You lost so many companions... It must be hard. I don't know how to comfort you, Master Pashir."

"No such thing. Just by being here, Mira, you're a constant support." Pashir spoke bitterly. Mira had not been informed of the circumstances of how the Imperial Guards had been disbanded.

Since the position of crown prince was now vacant, the Crown Prince's Imperial Guards had, in the real meaning of the sense, been disbanded. Just as the Prince had requested, Gowen, his adopted daughter, Hou Ran, about twenty former gladiators who had once belonged to the Tarkas Gladiator Company, as well as Pashir, Miguel, and Mira, had been enlisted into General Rogue Saian's division.

General Rogue had welcomed them. However, the General himself was under penitence. Moreover, the Dawnlight Wings Division that he led was an air

carrier force consisting of dragonstone ships in which most of the commanders were qualified Winged Dragon Officers or airship pilots. While it did have some infantry troops, there were few cavalymen. And as it did not recruit mercenaries, there was no precedent for this influx of soldiers, so Pashir and the others were somewhat adrift in the division.

“I’m not unhappy with the current situation. I got some pay, and if I wanted, I could’ve escaped from working as a Mephian soldier. But I don’t know anything other than the sword. And at this point, I don’t think I could go back to working in a mine.”

Pashir did not halt his steps as he spoke. He had never been good at talking with women. Naturally, the topic turned to himself.

“Even though there are no chains on your feet, they still treat you like a beast. Sure, it’s different from being a slave who goes where he’s told and fights when he’s told, but...

What am I’m going on about – Pashir grumbled inwardly. He felt like clicking his tongue.

Just then –

“Just what you’d expect from a guy who used to serve the prince.”

“Even when he’s patrolling the fortress, he’s taking a woman along.”

A group of burly men came into sight, mouthing sarcasms. They were Rogue Saian’s soldiers, and it was obvious at a glance that they were irritated.

Pashir sent them an acknowledging glance and tried to carry on with Mira. A particularly large man stood to block his way. His line of sight was even higher than Pashir’s. Pashir finally stopped walking.

“You got business with me?”

“You’re sure cocky for a newbie,” the giant barred his teeth. “Since you’re an ignorant slave, we’ll teaching you some manners.”

No surprises – Pashir watched the soldiers surround him front and back. There were five of them. *The tension has been piling up.*

Their general, Rogue Saian, was being kept away from Solon because he had

aligned himself with the Prince's actions. Not surprisingly, they felt something close to hatred towards Pashir and the others who had been the Prince's own men.

"Do women and children need to follow those manners?"

"Whaa?" Pashir's calm attitude seemed to get on the giant's nerves and he narrowed his eyes, but, "the woman's fine. Go wherever."

"M-Master Pashir."

When Mira looked up at him, Pashir gestured for her to go. She looked hesitant but, when he sent her another pressing glance, she left gingerly.

"Now then, what is it I'm going to be learning?"

"Something that goes without saying," the giant swung his fist hard.

Pashir stooped low to avoid it and threw his own fist at the giant's stomach. He crouched without saying a word. The men jumped at him from in front and behind. He just barely managed to dodge, but, just when he landed a blow on the second man's cheek, a third one got him into a grapple hold.

This should do.

With his back to a pillar, he crumpled down. After which, he let the men hit and kick him. His thick arms protected only his face and his vital points. By Pashir's estimate, they weren't planning on killing him.

"This year's 'Lord' Felipe is just a hulk of nothing."

The soldiers scornfully spat out his title as runner-up in the Founding Festival's gladiatorial tournament. Their hatred was laid bare, the pretext of "teaching him manners" long tossed aside. They taunted and knocked him about.

"Rebel bastard, how dare you pretend to be a Mephian soldier!"

"You're dragging the General's name into the mud!"

He let the heavy blows from fists and feet rain down onto him, and was planning to wait for the storm to pass when –

"Hold!"

Like a saviour in a stage-play, he came rushing in at the last minute, his voice ringing. Miguel Tes. At the sight of his eyes, which were gleaming like a young boy's, Pashir sent him a sharp glare, as much as to say – *Don't go interfering* – but...

"I'm here, you don't need to worry anymore, Pashir."

As bad luck would have it, Miguel could not have been more enthusiastic. It was not just the regular soldiers who had been bottling up their resentment. A popular swordsman in the gladiatorial arena, what Miguel hated above all else was to not be in the limelight.

He knocked down a soldier who had been about to kick Pashir.

"Asshole!"

"Get him too!"

The soldiers now swarmed towards Miguel. Pashir felt exasperated, but the one that Miguel had knocked down was grappling with him from behind, and with Miguel now in danger, Pashir had no choice but to get up and help him.

What followed next was a brawl and a free-for-all.

Pashir felt the impact of a stone that had been thrown against his cheek. He spat a mouthful of blood towards the arrogant soldier, and punched him in the jaw from below with enough strength to kill him. Miguel was moving through several soldiers as smoothly as though he were in water, his fists flying and his hips twisting as he sent out kicks.

"What? What's going on?"

"Felipe's on a rampage."

More soldiers eventually happened to pass by, and between those who waded in to help, and those who were hooting and jeering, it almost felt like a kind of revelry.

While he fought, Pashir's blood rushed hot. His fighting spirit was surging so that he no longer understood why he had initially allowed himself to be beaten up. With every move, and with an agility that seemed impossible for that burly frame, he struck the soldiers in the face, the abdomen, or the legs, while those

who tried to wrestle him down found themselves flipped over and thrown to the ground without even knowing how he had been able to untangle himself from them.

“Pretty good, Pashir,” laughed Miguel, who was standing by his side. His face was covered in the blood that was gushing from his nose. “If it’s barehanded, even that Orba wouldn’t be your match.”

“No discipline!” The regular soldiers meanwhile were jeering vehemently. “Our Dawnlight Wings Division has plenty of bruisers! Newbies don’t get to go around doing whatever they want!”

Pashir and Miguel’s clothes were in tatters, and with their blood-stained muscles showing bare, they looked exactly like long-serving gladiators. Even the Mephian soldiers could not hide the awe they felt towards their opponents. At the same time, the better those two did, the more they themselves were losing their dignity. Their numbers increased more and more, until they seemed to be about to completely swallow up the two gladiators.

“What are you doing!” A thunderous roar tore through the air.

The soldiers suddenly stood to attention, as the one bearing down on them was none other than their general, Rogue Saian.

When Pashir turned to look, he saw Mira half cowering behind a distant pillar. She must have been the one who had alerted the general.

Even as Rogue rushed towards them, panting for breath, the soldiers stood still. Such was his leadership over them. Silently, Rogue looked at one soldier after another.

“Return to your posts!”

At this second bellowed command, the soldiers hurried away, grabbing their fallen comrades as they went.

“What, but we’d only just gotten started,” Miguel Tes grumbled in a low voice. In the gladiatorial arena, one of his selling points had been his soft-hearted appearance, but now his face was starting to swell up all over and was changing shape.

With the back of his fist, Pashir wiped the blood and sweat that clung to his beard.

“General.”

“I hadn’t realised,” Rogue shook his head, his shoulders heaving. “I know – that proves that as their commander, I’m lacking.”

“They love you, General.” Pashir stated shortly.

Rogue was silent for a moment, then, “I know that too,” he said.

That same evening, the ship carrying Princess Vileena arrived in Nedain.

Chapter 4: The Ladies' Secret

Part 1

Glancing at Gowen as he returned to his room in the barracks, Ran asked, "The Princess has arrived?"

She had, of course, been informed that Gowen had received the task of escorting Vileena. Her question was only by way of confirmation.

"Yeah," Gowen answered with a somewhat bleak expression. Ran tilted her head to one side,

"You don't look good. Shall I brew you some medicinal tea?"

"No," with a thump, Gowen let himself drop into a wooden chair. Back when he was the overseer to the slaves, no one would have seen him look this tired. Ran however seemed to find it familiar.

"Your expression is the same as that time."

You might be right, thought Gowen, but he did not say it out loud.

"Master Gowen, welcome back," the boy who acted as their chamberlain appeared at that point.

He briskly tidied the pieces of armour that Gowen had removed and had already prepared a change of clothes for him.

"Reeno, could you run me some hot water?"

"Certainly," the boy bowed, his adorable features set in an overly-serious expression.

Gowen felt even more exhausted and sighed. In truth, his body and mind were worn out from a threat unlike any he had experienced in either the battlefield or the gladiatorial arena.

During the journey, when he had been acting as the Princess' escort, he had repeatedly felt a gaze on him. Princess Vileena had been watching him from the window of her carriage.

This might mean trouble, Gowen had braced himself every time. He had felt the same unease when he had initially heard that the Princess had informed the Emperor that she wished to go to Nedain. The Princess' personality was not one to wallow in grief. Since the Prince's death had been so sudden, he had wondered whether she might be going to verify the truth of it.

Gowen of course knew the 'truth'. It was only natural, since Prince Gil Mephius – or rather, Orba, posing as the Prince – had told him his plan in person.

When Orba had been explaining it to him, Gowen had not interrupted to say a single word.

"Is that alright?" Was the only thing that he had asked, checking the impulse to say far more.

He had known that they did not have much time. They had been on their way back from providing reinforcement to Garbera, and Apta Fortress was already so close it was almost in sight. Orba had given a small nod.

Gowen had responded with a nod of his own.

"Got it. I'll help you."

"I'll be giving you trouble until the end, Overseer."

Sure, Gowen had answered then had said no more. Orba was not the only one who had felt dizzy from the constant changes in environment. There had been a lot that Gowen had been unable to get his head around in these past few months.

"Have you told Ran?"

"I'm planning to later."

When he heard that, something must have shown in Gowen's expression despite his intention to control it, since Orba immediately frowned in displeasure.

"Is something strange?"

"No."

Considering how he had been up until then, it was unusual for Orba to confide in someone who was not directly involved in a plan. Gowen could understand Orba's feeling of wanting to put off that conversation. And Orba, who was quick to catch on and who of course knew it too, had gotten irritated by it.

Afterwards, they had returned to Apta. Once he had finished various preparations, Gowen had headed to a room in the barracks. He had gone to call on Shique, who had apparently likewise completed his arrangements. It had been evening, but because it was cloudy, the room had already been plunged into darkness.

Thinking about it, theirs was a strange relationship. They were among the very few in all of Mephius who knew the terrifying secret that the Crown Prince had been replaced by a body-double.

"He hasn't said anything yet, but..." Shique had said while watching the River Yunos flowing far beneath them, "I plan to go with him. Although since at the moment he'll object when I tell him that, I intend to do so against his will."

"I thought as much"

"What about you, Gowen?"

"Me... Yeah. At my age, I'm too old to start anew again. I'll stay in Mephius. Along with Ran – well, that's if she wants to."

"Take care," Shique said as he turned to him, then laughed cheerfully.

Gowen had understood the reason for that laugh. A sword-slave and an overseer. It was impossible that they would exchange "take cares" at parting. Gowen could only smile wryly at how just that alone seemed to demonstrate how wondrous and abnormal their fates had been in those past few months.

At the very last, Shique had said, "You know, about Orba... That evening when

he first came to the Tarkas Group, you cracked down on him like an iron hammer. You kept on raging that you'd kill him. Yeah, this kid, he'll do it. He'll do it, but sooner or later, he's bound to run into someone who'll beat him at that game and he'll end up dead. With his personality, I'm sure he won't live long, is what I thought."

With that talk, which could not really be called happy reminiscing, they had left the room.

The plan was put into action at once. That evening, Orba had fallen headlong into the River Yunos to the accompaniment of gunshots. Gowen and Shique had been the first to leave the fortress, leading the Imperial Guards to search for him. Shique had gotten a small boat to pull Orba out and, without lighting even a single torch, they had headed for the opposite shore. So as to draw attention away from that, Gowen conversely had ever more torches be held high and had pretended to continue searching along the river.

From thereafter, it had been just as in Pashir's recollections.

Gowen had heaved a sigh of relief at that moment, as the plan had gone as expected; but since then, he had found himself in a bind that left him cursing Orba bitterly.

So much so that whatever happened from now on, he did not think he would ever resent someone else this strongly again.

Of all things, Orba had not told Hou Ran about the plan.

"You knew, didn't you? Gowen?" He had cringed when she had pressed him about it. Even though her expression had been the same as usual... no, because of that, the pale light flashing from her eyes had been all the more terrifying.

"Why wasn't I informed? Did he think I'd reveal the secret? Did he have that little faith in me?"

"I-It was probably tough," as he answered Gowen looked so terrified that anyone who knew him would think he was a different person. "Since you had a close relationship, bringing up having to say goodbye must have been tough. You can understand, right?"

It was lucky for Gowen that right after that, it had been the season for her to

take care of the dragons while they laid their eggs. For awhile, Ran had devoted her entire energy to the them. Before long, she had calmed down.

"Gowen. I'm more or less able to 'judge'," she had said. That she raised her chin a little and smiled, showing that she was feeling boastful. Living together, Gowen had come to understand his adopted daughter's minute changes in expression.

"About what?"

"The link between those children and Orba, which also means the link between myself and Orba, is unbroken."

Oh? He had never heard of Ran having a mysterious power, or that being exceptionally good at taming dragons led to precognition or being able to divine the future. But anyway, Gowen felt that she would be satisfied if he let himself be convinced.

With that, Gowen had thought that this unfamiliar threat had passed, but...

"Your expression is the same as that time."

Just as Ran had pointed out, when he had been escorting Vileena, the former overseer of slaves had experienced the second coming of those days with his adopted daughter.

The Princess' gaze has seemed to want to ask something. In point of fact, Gowen had been preparing himself for a barrage of questions. Don't turn tail no matter what you get asked; he had prepared all sorts of answers beforehand.

But Vileena said little. When her eyes met Gowen's, she gave him a slight nod in greeting. For some reason, he felt ominous chills.

Just as he was thinking that he might be worrying for nothing, only once and suddenly, as though on a whim, the Princess had approached him when they had stopped to eat.

"It must be hard for you too, Gowen," she had smiled.

It had been so abrupt and he was so unsure of her meaning that Gowen had been left nothing but bewildered and unable to come out with a single one of the answers that he had prepared. By 'hard', did she mean his escort duty or

something else?

That Princess, did she come to Nedain for something?

He had again and again been left astonished by Vileena's ability to take action. She had guts too. Even Orba had been astounded when he heard that during the battle at Apta, when the soldiers within the ship that had been attacked were stricken by fear, she had issued an appeal and induced them to stay.

Gowen turned to look at his adopted daughter.

'The Princess might come to talk to you. Be careful.'

"I'm not good at telling lies," said Ran. "But I shouldn't talk about the truth. I know."

Gowen and Ran lived together in those apartments within the barracks. That was another strange relationship. After all, they had hardly ever spoken back in their days with the gladiator group. Because Ran hated the strict discipline within the barracks for the Imperial Guards, once Gowen was appointed as their commander and had received a detached house to live in, he had adopted her. At that time, they had been provided with slaves to take care of their everyday necessities, but currently, they only had the boy called Reeno to do so. This Reeno was not a page appointed by General Saian. Gowen had known the boy since some time earlier and had employed him at his own expense.

Ran spent all day taking care of the dragons. In Solon and in Apta, she had carefully looked after those that were attached to the Imperial Guards, among which were a species of dragon called Yunion, which had been presented as gifts when peace was concluded with Taúlia.

She only used the living apartments when she ate or when she slept, although Ran might also occasionally cook. She was a girl who was originally from a tribe of western nomads, so there were many things that left Gowen astounded, but her dish of fried Jijis insects – which was originally a kind of meal that she made for the dragons – went well with strong spices and he enjoyed eating it as a snack.

Although when he had once invited Rogue Saian over, they did not seem to

suit him and he had just continuously gulped down alcohol.

The next day.

That day too, Ran had gone early to the dragon pen, but there was someone who had turned up even earlier than her.

“It has been a long time.”

Vileena Owell.

For some reason, she was wearing a long peasant skirt and a thick blouse.

So slightly that you would not notice it unless you looked carefully, Ran drew her eyebrows together.

Part 2

“Let me help you,” Vileena said, full of enthusiasm. She was wearing high boots and looked like an energetic child whose eyes were sparkling at the thought of trying something new.

“You should stop,” Ran however, and in spite of this being their first meeting in a long time, was unfriendly from the start. “You’ll only get hurt. If you do things poorly, as soon as I take my eyes off you, you’ll only end in a dragon’s stomach, Vileena.”

Vileena was momentarily left speechless at her blunt words. The Princess’ personality, however, was not one to run away from threats. Nor did Hou Ran do anything else to stop her. Work began.

First, Ran started by cleaning the dragon pens. Inside it were cages in which a fixed number of dragons were kept, separated by species. When Ran unhesitatingly entered the cages, she took in buckets of water that the slaves had drawn and poured them out while shovelling away the dragon dung and stale hay.

Although the dragons, guided by Ran, moved out of the way, they did not leave their cages. They lumbered around with their massive bodies and Vileena, who was learning by observation as she worked, inadvertently lost her sense of caution.

Since the pens were, of course, large enough to accommodate several dragons, it was labour-intensive work. In all honesty, even Vileena, who was fairly confident in her physical stamina, could tell that her mind and body would be worn down if she had to do the work while also remaining vigilant of the dragons. Additionally, the stench was ferocious. Even the dragon handlers who put the dragons through their military drills usually left this kind of work to slaves or subordinates.

Hou Ran moved around with light and practiced movements. She was taller than Vileena, but it was still a wonder how that slender body could hold so much strength.

Vileena was drenched in sweat in no time at all. The smell was getting worse and was making her feel like throwing up. But she grit her teeth and bore with it, wondering if she would eventually get used to it.

At that moment, she felt something behind her. She felt instinctively that it was not human. Suddenly, faster than the startled Vileena could turn around, something shoved her back hard and she fell, sprawling forward.

Ran had flown over before she fully realised what had happened. She stood in the way between Vileena's back and the medium-sized dragon, a Baian, that was starting to bend over her. At first, the Baian looked like it was going to resist and bite, but Ran stared fixedly at it with eyes like glass beads, and it soon started to back away, giving off feeble cries as it did so.

The blood had drained from Vileena's face as she looked back. Ran glanced at the Princess' expression and said,

"This child really doesn't like you. That's because you were thinking of something else. Dragons can read the emotions of nearby humans. However, because they don't understand human thoughts at all, when a human isn't thinking about them, they end up wondering if it isn't perhaps an enemy, and then they can't help feeling frightened. On top of that, this child has been irritated for a long time and its mood is worse than ever. Even I might be bitten if I'm not careful. Now then, you should leave the rest to me and go back. You should be somewhere more appropriate for you, Vileena."

Vileena remained silent. With hay stuck to her knees, she firmly sat down and did not move. Ran went back to her work. After a while,

"Is there something you want to talk to me about?"

"Can you read my emotions?"

"Even without being a dragon, that much isn't hard."

Following Ran's movements with listless eyes, Vileena gave a single nod.

After having stood up and left the cage, Vileena kept Ran, who continued to work on the other side of the iron bars, at the edge of her vision and started to talk haltingly about her feelings.

Ran did not interrupt. She continued working without so much as glancing at the Princess, to the point where it was doubtful whether she was even listening, but Vileena continued talking.

“I –”

After returning to Solon, she had spent her time in inactivity. She did not have the energy to do anything and even though she had been aware that the people around her, starting with Theresia, had been worried about her, even that felt unpleasant and she had retreated into her shell. However, when envoys came from Garbera, the moment she heard them urge her to return home, the thought flared up in her heart that *I can't go back like this*.

At that time, the doubts which had long been swirling around inside her took on a tangible form and rose to the surface of her mind.

“You know it too, Ran... that Prince Gil clashed with General Oubary's Black Armour Division in a village near Apta.”



According to what the Prince had explained at the time, in the past, General Oubary had laid waste to several villages in Apta's surroundings. He had snatched their crops, money and goods, and assaulted the women; in order to seal their mouths, he had slaughtered any villager, whether they submitted or tried to resist, before finally setting fire to the villages.

Gil, having become the lord of Apta Castle, had discovered this past, however while he was collecting information from the various villages, Oubary had deployed his troops to silence him. Gil had been quick to sense this and had laid a trap for him in one of the villages.

Vileena and Ran, who had gone searching for Gil, had been at the actual scene.

"I heard that the ones who shot Prince Gil afterwards were soldiers of the Black Armour Division. Out of revenge against him. But..."

Oubary, who was considered to have commanded the shooting, had fought with the Imperial Guards near the border. Although he had been injured, he had fled back to Solon where he had been captured.

"When the Prince ambushed the Black Armour Division, the General was with them. I saw him there with my own eyes. The Prince should have dealt with him one way or the other at the time, wouldn't he? When he left the village, the Prince was neither irritated nor impatient. So I cannot imagine that he had let the General escape. And he would never have simply sent away a person who had turned their sword against him. Whether the General was captured alive or killed in the struggle, it contradicts both the later shooting incident and his arrest."

Colour was returning to Vileena's pale skin.

"From the various rumours that I've heard in Solon and in Nedain, it seems that somehow or another, the Prince's fight with the Black Armour Division has been concealed. No, I do not even know whether it was concealed or whether it was never reported, but because of that, I cannot help but find things unconvincing. There might be something behind that contradiction. Since it's the Prince, after all. Even though there isn't the slightest doubt about the truth of his 'death', what if it wasn't a truth but some kind of stratagem? ...Of course,

it may just be what I foolishly wish to believe. However, since there is some room for doubt, I cannot simply accept his death. If all my doubts can be dispelled, and if Prince Gil's 'death' cannot be discredited, then I will accept it."

"..."

She suddenly became aware that Ran had stopped moving. She was staring at the Princess with an unusually dazed expression.

"W-What is it?" Vileena wondered if she had said something so very strange while she was confiding her thoughts.

"Amazing."

"Eh?"

"You've thought it out that far even though there was nothing to offer you an answer."

Under Ran's fixed gaze, Vileena felt embarrassed to talk. Both of them felt equal admiration for the other Ran gently stroked the horn of a Yunion dragon that happened to walk by her.

"So, did you come here to check up on that?"

"Yes," Vileena nodded, "I would have liked to meet with General Oubary in person; however, as was to be expected, I was unable to do so. I thought that perhaps you or Gowen might know something about it so I came here, but..."

"But?"

"If I plough through things, I will just stir up trouble. In the same way that I've caused for you, Ran, by trying to butter you up. So at the moment, rather than asking other people, what I really want is to go to Apta."

I see, she thought after saying it herself. Talking to another person had allowed her to realise what she truly wanted for the first time.

"To Apta?"

"At the time, I was honestly anything but calm. So I want to have a second look at it. Who knows, maybe I'll find a clue."

"..."

She wanted to go to Apta.

Although it was a desire that had suddenly surged up, she wondered if she had not actually wanted to do so ever since she had been in Solon.

Maybe now, I will find some trace of the Prince. I might be able to notice it if he left something behind.

Viewed differently, if there was something important, she might perhaps never have noticed it if she had never left Apta. The more she thought about it, the more eager she was to go. She wanted to leave Nedain right this second, before the traces of the Prince faded with the passage of time and disappeared.

However, this one-week stay in Nedain had been given to her to grant her last-minute whim. Once it was over, envoys from Garbera would immediately come to see her, she would also be pressured by those from Mephius, and she would be forced to return to her country whether she liked it or not.

Biting her lower lip and frantically trying to hold back the impatience and wishes that were welling up inside her, Vileena asked,

“How about you?” Her question was much softer than might have been expected from her words up until then. “Do you think that the Prince really died?”

“I...” Ran’s mouth remained open for several seconds. “I did not see his corpse with my own eyes.”

Noon.

A section of the landing area for air carriers was lined with warehouses. A slave woman named Krau had stretched her large body out on one of their roofs and was having a nap.

She had served the wealthy Birac merchant, Zaj Haman, piloting air carriers for him, but, on her master’s orders, she had gone to work for Prince Gil. Now, after the Prince’s death, she had received a recommendation from Gowen and was employed by General Rogue Saian along with the Prince’s Imperial Guards. Since Rogue’s Dawnlight Wings Division was mainly an air force, it was the ideal

position for Krau. However, all she was given to do were chores like servicing the ships, or cleaning them or the warehouses. Unlike when she was working for merchants or the Imperial Guards, here, they would not leave the handling of a ship to a woman, and to one who was a slave at that.

Being driven into these various tasks made Krau's head spin. Even for her, continuing with that same work for a year or even half a year, the excess fat would surely fall entirely away, but she was an obstinate woman who was very good at gambling, and who called in the debts of the labourers and slaves that she played against by having them do her work in her place, opening up free time for her to be idle.

Basking in the warm sunlight with her large arms for pillows, she wore a truly contented expression.

"So she's here after all," having climbed up to the roof, Ran laughed unintentionally at the sight of Krau. She turned back to look at Vileena, who was climbing up behind her, and put a finger to her lips, telling her to *shh*.

Softly and quietly, Ran crept up to Krau then let out the most incredible cry. It was a sound like the roar of a dragon and it made the surrounding air vibrate.

"Hyeee!" Krau sprang up and nearly fell from the roof. "T-That's terrible! I thought I was going to jump out of my skin!"

"Then that would be perfect. Aren't you the one who's always saying 'I want to lose weight, I want to lose weight'?"

"Who wants to lose weight by dying? Honestly, you and.... Oh?" Krau noticed that there was a girl behind Ran. "Well that's rare. Who're you with? A new friend?"

"It's been awhile, Krau," Vileena bit back her laughter and curtsied, and for a second, Krau drew her thick eyebrows together, then suddenly and with astonishing speed, she prostrated herself.

"I-I even showed such an unsightly scene to the Princess!"

"It doesn't matter. Please raise your head." This time, Vileena smiled then lowered herself onto one knee so that her gaze was level with Krau's, "the truth is Krau, I have a favour to beg of you." Krau did not say anything, but her

expression turned stiff as she got a truly awful feeling about it.

Vileena was planning to stay a week in Nedain. During that time, she went to see Rogue Saian to express her gratitude for his help towards Garbera.

“I...” Rogue was a little embarrassed. He had originally intended to go with the Prince to Zaim Fortress, but he had been stopped from doing so by that same Prince. “He said that he alone should receive His Majesty’s reprimands. Such kind words... To think that something like that could happen... I never would have imagined it...”

Rogue was moved to tears as he spoke. To help cheer up the Princess who had just lost her fiancé, Rogue had prepared airships for her to use as she pleased during her stay in Nedain, but he was the one who ended up being consoled by her instead.

“There was no connection between the events in Apta and the sending of reinforcements to Garbera. General, there is nothing for you to feel bad about.” And so, five days passed since the Princess had arrived in Nedain.

The local lord, Jairus Abigoal had invited her for a meal.

Jairus had returned to Nedain immediately after having taken part in the commemorative ceremony for the erection of the temple in Solon. He had, of course, been informed of Vileena’s arrival, but as his honest thoughts on the matter were that she was an annoying guest, he had claimed to be busy and had not yet seen her.

He took pride in being in a position which was somewhat closer to the Emperor in comparison to the other retainers. And he guessed that the Emperor had no intention of prolonging the alliance with Garbera.

At this point, why should I have to keep company with this Garberan princess while she decides to go sightseeing?

And thus, the Princess was nothing but an annoying guest. Still, he obviously could not ignore her to the point of not seeing her even once, and so he had arranged to have her for dinner one time only. Even so, Jairus would not openly display that attitude in front of the Princess. He would do his utmost to create a

welcoming atmosphere.

Meanwhile.

“Princess, this is repetitive of me, but...” Theresia confronted the Princess right before heading for the meal, “you won’t forget your promise to me, will you?”

“Theresia, really,” Vileena smiled, looking as though she wanted to add, *definitely repetitive.*

The ‘promise’ concerned Raymond’s affair. The young aristocrat who, had directly appealed to the Emperor about the current conditions in Nedain, had thus incurred Jairus’ displeasure, and had been thrown into a dungeon. Perhaps it was so that he could serve as an example, but he had still yet to be released. Theresia firmly reminded her that she was not to hound Jairus about the matter or to criticise him for it.

“Would a princess from the honourable and knightly Garbera break her word? Well then, let’s go. Is there anything wrong with my hair and clothes?”

The young girl gave a quick twirl. Theresia looked deeply suspicious, but she did not believe that after having brought up the name of her home country, the patriotic Princess would sully its pride by lying.

“It is fine,” Theresia nodded decisively. “It is not too showy, nor is it either fawning over Mephius or too steeped in the style of Garbera. I, Theresia, have impeccable taste.”

Before long, Jairus and Vileena, both harbouring their own thoughts, sat down as scheduled at either end of the long table. Both of them minded their positions and their manners well enough, so there was no particular problem, although neither did they spend an especially enjoyable time together.

When the dessert had been brought out and placed before them,

“By the way, Lord Abigoal,” Vileena tilted her head slightly to one side, “when do you intend to settle that matter with Lord Raymond?”

She brought up the name perfectly offhandedly. Jairus nearly spat out the fruit that he had just put into his mouth.

“W-When? What is it that you mean by that?” Jairus drank a mouthful of wine and tried to look composed.

“Oh my, feigning ignorance?” Vileena giggled girlishly.

Unable to see through her real intentions, Jairus started to change the subject.

“T-This is such a provincial town that I am sure you must be bored, Princess. If you go north a little, there are some places with some very nice views. If you would like, my son could accompany you on a ride there tomorrow and...”

“Lord Raymond is popular among the villagers, is he not?” Vileena ignored him and nodded as though in understanding of something. “Certainly, he can only be blamed for interfering as he did. You dealt with him with admirable firmness, Lord Abigoal. Still, once you forgive him in the near future, the people will see and be touched by your generosity; Lord Raymond will also reflect on his faults from the bottom of his heart.”

“...”

“Additionally, your ability to curb a slave rebellion before it happens will be extolled by all; Lord Abigoal and the people will have yet another reason to praise you.”

Vileena smiled and turned her sparkling gaze towards the lord of the manor. Jairus gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Saying that he had curbed a slave rebellion sounded good, but in reality, Jairus had set fire to a village for sheltering a single slave.

“I believe His Majesty was saying something similar just before I left for Nedain.”

“H-His Majesty?” Jairus Abigoal squeaked. As though to help calm himself, he smoothed down his moustache which had been oiled into tapering points.

“What was it that His Majesty said?”

“I did not hear it directly either. But I can imagine the gist of it. That if Lord Raymond were to be executed, it would fan the people’s anxiety and fear, and might cause a repeat of the tragedy of Kilro. It was probably something like that,” Vileena said vaguely, smiling all the more. After which, she continued to

heap praise on Jairus for his ability.

Two days later, the lord of Nedain officially announced that he was granting a pardon to Raymond for his crimes.

When Theresia, who knew the circumstances, heard about it, she looked up at the ceiling and uttered a shriek.

Vileena was nearing the end of her intended stay in Nedain, however the day before she was scheduled to return, the Princess discovered a problem with the ship that was supposed to take her back to Solon. “That ship would not even make it to the relay station,” she announced to the assembled maintenance crew.

That being the case, it was suggested that another ship be prepared, but for some reason, Vileena was unusually stubborn about it. She claimed that she particularly liked the white exterior of the ship she had been scheduled to use and insisted on returning in that ship.

In the end, it was determined that they would work night and day if necessary to repair the ship. When Krau and others went to inspect the ship, she exclaimed in exaggerated surprise,

“The ether injection nozzles are broken. The propulsion propellers are also in a bad state. I’d better take my time to check over things.”

Naturally, this rotund woman had in her clutches all of the personal assets that had once belonged to the men in charge of maintaining and repairing the ships, but none of those around her were aware of that.

Part 3

Gowen was suspicious of the Princess' behaviour. In the end, since coming to Nedain, she had not once gone to visit him nor had him summoned before her.

I thought she was definitely going to ask about the Prince or about Orba. Has she changed her mind?

Just like Simon, who had also put himself on guard over the Princess' visit just like Simon had, he had felt that this was a bit anti-climactic.

It had been ten days since the Garberan princess had come to Nedain.

Right after the sun had set, Gowen was summoned by Rogue Saian. A little while earlier, Gowen had received the news that an air carrier messenger had arrived from Solon. He was wondering whether it had come to convince the Princess to return there, but –

“What?” When he heard the details from Rogue, the former overseer of sword slaves unabashedly opened his eyes wide.

Bewilderment also clung to the General's deeply wrinkled face like a thin layer of skin; however, he had spent many years on battlefields and immediately ordered the various commanders, Gowen among them, to begin their preparations.

After briefly stopping by the barracks that housed his troops – although, it was no more than a platoon of a few dozen men headed by Pashir and Miguel – to give them his orders, Gowen hastily returned to his own chambers.

Ran, however, was not there. He asked Reeno, the chamberlain, about it.

“She returned for a while in the evening, but...” the boy answered, looking no less confused than Rogue had earlier.

Gowen soon found out the reason for that. A dish of the usual fried Jijis was set imposingly on the dining table. There was enough of it for at least ten

people.

“The hell’s this?” Gowen wore the same expression as he had when he had received his orders from Rogue.

At around about the same time that Rogue had called for Gowen, Vileena, who had been having her meal with a large number of servants waiting on her, suddenly stood up.

“Princess?”

Glancing at the freckled young woman beside her who had just spoken in a surprised voice, Vileena felt a little depressed. Lined up on the dining table were nothing but dishes that she had previously called “delicious.” She would soon be returning to Solon, and this was probably all that those working at the fortress could do to show her kindness.

Setting aside Lord Jairus’ personality, the people of Nedain were simple and warm-hearted. Because of that, her chest tightened at the thought of what she was about to do.

“I’ve had enough,” Vileena cut short her own thoughts. More than half of the meal was left.

“A-Are you not feeling well, Princess?”

“I will go call a doctor at once...”

“I said I have had enough.”

Vileena shook off the flustered serving girls and left the dining hall that was reserved for the use of aristocrats. No sooner had she done so that she strode towards the port, looking angry and in a huff. “I wish to return to Solon immediately. I cannot bear to spend another night in this rural backwater. What is with this town? Nothing to eat but dry meat and potatoes, nowhere to go and have fun, and not even any entertainers to amuse guests. When I was in Garbera, I would never have believed it!”

She was utterly different from how she usually was. If anyone who knew the Garberan princess had been there to see her, it would have been clear to them what was going on. *Ah, she really is a terrible actress*, they would have thought.

The people of Nedain however, did not know Vileena's personality.

She easily gave up on the white ship, which she had previously been obsessed about, and wilfully had a different one prepared for her return to Solon. It was a medium-sized ship with the capacity to seat about ten people, but taking into account cruising range^[1], rather than speed, it could travel a long way for its size.

Krau was at the helm. Those manning the other stations were the maintenance crew who had been working with her on repairing the other ship. They had all been thoroughly drilled in how to handle a ship by Krau herself.

The harbourmasters had come flying while Krau was checking the engines.

"Unless it's for something urgent, you can't take out a ship that hasn't been scheduled for departure. Even you can understand that much, right?"

"Well now. Does the Princess wanting to return to Solon as soon as possible count as something urgent for you? Me, I'm just a slave who received her direct orders. Wouldn't those also be difficult to overturn unless it's for something urgent?"

The harbourmasters looked at each other. Krau figured that the odds were about fifty-fifty that things would go smoothly, but at that moment, their surroundings were suddenly thrown into upheaval. Armed soldiers were running around, and mechanics that Krau recognised started working on some of the other ships, apparently making urgent flight preparations.

Raised voices were also calling out for the harbourmasters from all around. Krau seized that opportunity to make her way to the bridge.

"Something seems to have happened," she reported. The Princess was of course already on the bridge, as was Hou Ran.

Vileena looked dubious for a moment, "Are they practicing night flights?"

"No. It looks like whatever it is wasn't scheduled either, so that can't be it. And secondly, General Saian himself is..."

"Princess!"

Theresia came into sight. Apparently, she had come running as soon as she

had heard. Her face was bright red because of it. With her eyes flaring, she demanded, “What is it that you are planning to do this time?”

“Something scandalous. Isn’t acting outrageously normal for me?”

“That is certain,” Theresia acknowledged, “However, equally, you do not do things without thinking, Princess.”

“I wonder.”

“I have known you longer than anyone.”

Theresia was of course bitter about the fact that, despite her warning, her mistress had raised the issue of Raymond with Jairus, the lord of Nedain.

What worried her more than anything was that — *she is using more intricate methods than before.*

Vileena neither interrogated Jairus nor rebuked him. In that sense, she had kept her promise to Theresia. She wondered if that meant that the ever-reckless Princess had become a bit wiser.

“It is futile to try and run away. Kindly confess everything. What on earth are you — *hic.*”

The end of Theresia’s sentence got lost in a hiccup. It was not only because she had been running that her face was red. That evening, Vileena had presented her with a liquor that was a local specialty in Nedain.

Krau said loudly, “The bridge tends to jolt a lot. It’s dangerous if you’re drunk. The cabin on the second deck is the safest. We’ll take you!”

Calling for one of the mechanics, she had him start to lead Theresia away. She would resist if they were to try and eject her from the ship itself, so Krau’s plan was to lock her in the cabin. Unlike her mistress, Theresia had common-sense. In times like these, she would follow the advice of those who knew what they were talking about.

“There will be punishment waiting for you later... *hic.*”

The port was getting noisier and noisier. One after another, voices called for the harbourmasters until they were run off their feet.

“What should we do?”

Krau could not conceal her anxiousness as she spoke. Vileena made up her mind. She too felt uneasy about this unexpected situation, but after having come this far, they could do nothing but seize it as a favourable opportunity.

“We fly.”

“Eh?”

“Before it’s too late – Come on Krau, please hurry.”

She had acted unlike herself and had only just managed to grasp this chance. The young girl’s heart had already long since flown to Apta. Now it only remained for her body to catch up.

“Come on!”

Receiving Vileena’s order, Krau reluctantly seized hold of the ship’s wheel. The ether engines roared, startling the men that were near them and making them back away.

Dragging its heavy body, the hull started to rise.

“Who is it that’s getting ahead of themselves!”

A voice could be heard in the distance. General Rogue’s voice. While feeling remorseful towards the general, Vileena was no longer at a point where she could still turn back. The ship soared into the night sky over Nedain.

As expected, both Rogue and Jairus must have received reports that the Princess and her followers were riding on board that ship and that she was returning to Solon. As proof of that, no airships were sent to chase after them.

Jairus’ thoughts were probably along the lines of — *doing whatever she pleases. Still, it spares me the trouble of seeing her off.*

Vileena’s destination, however, was not Solon. They planned to leave towards the north to make it look as though they were headed towards the capital, then turn southwest for Apta.

Normally, when flying at night, two or more ships would always sail together; that would allow them to mutually check positions by each other’s lights.

However, Krau had been thoroughly drilled in solo night flights from her long years with Zaj Haman. That was because she was mainly involved in trading with the west, something which had been prohibited in Mephius at the time.

She had a mechanic stand near the steerage system and plot a navigation course with a compass and map. Her knowledge and skill matched those of any non-commissioned officer.

Having for now left for the skies, Vileena heaved a sigh of relief.

Still, there would be no avoiding the uproar once they had arrived in Apta. Her wilful behaviour had gone a little too far. If rumour of it reached her home country of Garbera, she fully expected to be harshly criticised.

Even so...

Even so, she could not step foot on Garbera's soil without understanding to her own satisfaction what had happened. Prince Gil would have done the same. He who, no matter how far into a corner was driven, nor how much his allies might scorn him, would wait until he saw his chance to bring about the desired results, then act without fail.

"Hyee!" Krau suddenly made a sound like a shriek.

It had been less than an hour since they had set a course for the southwest. Krau suddenly cut down on their altitude. Abruptly flung forward, Vileena nearly fell from her seat.

"What happened?"

Krau had good eyesight. The mechanic who had been peering through binoculars also noticed, albeit belatedly.

"Ships in sight," he reported in a tense voice. "Their number... two... three. The central one is, there's no mistake, General Saian's own flagship?"

"Are they chasing after us?" Vileena's expression also stiffened.

They must have noticed their intention to head for Apta and had come to block the way. Although their ship was only medium-sized, it was not built for speed. If their opponent sent out airships, and had them take up battle formation, shaking them off would be difficult.

If the General himself is on board — Vileena fleetingly considered. The General had been fond of the Prince... If she explained the situation, she might be able to persuade him.

However, Rogue was already under intense scrutiny from the Emperor. It was naturally not Vileena's intention to involve him any further, or to cause him any disgrace. There had to be some way out of this – she was straining her wits to think of one when...

“No,” Krau muttered as she narrowed her eyes. “There's no sign that they've noticed us and it doesn't look like the airships have been sent out to search. Somehow, they don't seem to be chasing after us. Princess, those must be the ships that were being readied at the port. It looks like they're going in the same direction as us.”

According to Krau's explanation, the fleet under Rogue Saian's command, was flying in the same direction as they were. Which meant...

“General Saian is also going to Apta?” Vileena voiced the question.

Krau had said that there were no ships cleared for departure that evening. And yet, Rogue had hurriedly launched three ships. Additionally, their destination was Apta. The situation was clearly serious. Krau turned to look over her shoulder at Vileena, her plump face covered in sweat.

“What should we do?”

“There is no helping it.”

“Are we turning back?” Krau looked relieved.

“No. Stay far enough away that they will not be able to notice us, and follow after them.”

At her mistress' order, for one second only, Krau looked upwards as though seeking help.

It was a two-day journey from Nedain.

Vileena's ship had just enough ether loading capacity to cover the distance. Finally, when Apta was coming into sight, the ship had no choice but to lessen

the distance with Rogue Saian's fleet.

"If we get any closer than this, we'll be spotted," Krau screeched.

"Don't worry. We won't be found, we will be letting ourselves be found," Vileena answered with a decided expression.

She was worried that if they remained behind the fleet that was moving at a fixed speed, their ether might run out before they reached the port. Besides, Apta was right in front of their eyes. Even if they were detected at this point, she was not worried that they would be ordered to turn back. Such was Vileena's calculation.

Krau increased their speed in a frantic state of mind and steadily drew level with Rogue Saian's ships. Naturally, their ship also bore the crest of Mephius, but Rogue, suspicious of their affiliation, sent an airship out to them.

At Vileena's instructions, they received it on board without offering any resistance. The young pilot climbed up to the bridge.

"P-Princess!" At one glimpse of Princess Vileena, his voice broke into a falsetto.

The Princess also remembered his face. His name was Neil Tonson and he had been one of Prince Gil's Imperial Guards. He had served as the leader of the airship unit that, while stationed in Apta, Vileena had given some piloting instruction to.

He was currently affiliated to Gowen's platoon. Unlike the startled and flustered Neil, Vileena's expression was as cool as could be.

"We will land first. I would like to ask you to guide us," she said shrewdly.

Neil's naturally ruddy face flushed even redder. "A-Aye, aye." He had no choice but to obey.

With Neil's airship serving as guide, Vileena's ship, followed by General Saian's fleet, touched down one after another at Apta's landing area. After arriving at port, Rogue Saian practically pushed the other soldiers aside while energetically rushing towards the Princess, who had just appeared from her

ship.

Even so, there was someone who was even faster to greet her.

Nabarl Metti.

“This is a delightfully unexpected visit.” He had, of course, also heard the sudden news of her arrival, and was unable to wipe the expression of displeasure from his face.

Rogue felt that compared to usual, there was something unexpectedly different in the man’s manner.

“I didn’t expect to see you in Apta either. Weren’t you in Kilro?”

“Indeed, General,” Nabarl spun around and smiled at the veteran general. “And General Lorgo and his troops are expected tomorrow. Now that you have been appointed here, General Saian, I hope to learn from your wisdom.”

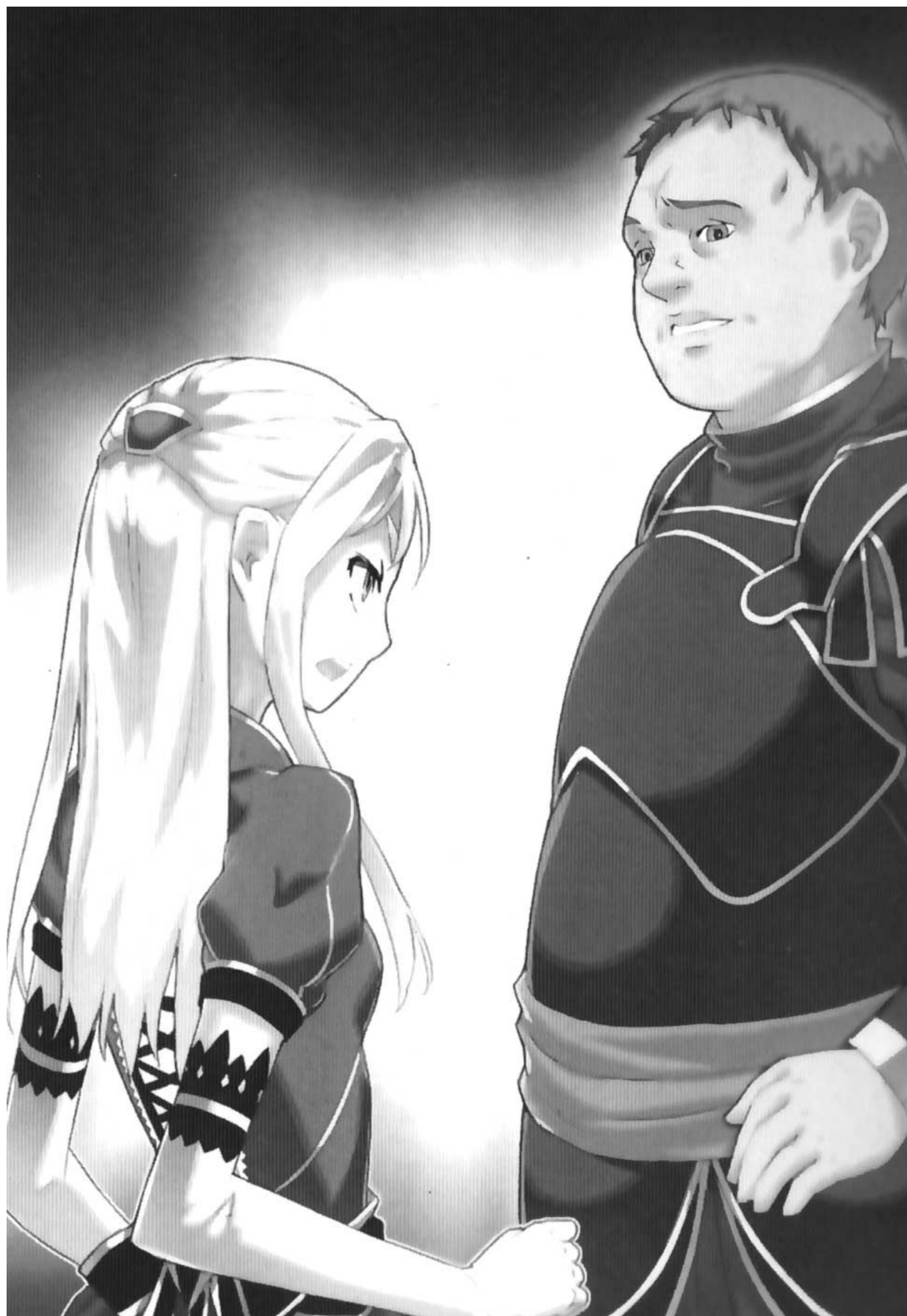
“What? Odyne Lorgo as well?”

Rogue appeared to be hearing about it for the first time. With two of the twelve generals being gathered in addition of Nabarl’s soldiers who had originally been stationed there, a considerable military force was being amassed at Apta.

Just like Rogue, Vileena was finding it strongly suspicious. She looked up at Nabarl.

“What is this about? Why would so many troops be needed in Apta?”

“I will have a room prepared for you, Princess. Please do consider heading back tomorrow.”



Ignoring Vileena's question, Nabarl gave a snap of his fingers. Soldiers, who appeared to be his subordinates, emerged from behind him. They were armed with swords and guns. It looked like the reason why he had been waiting at the port had not been to welcome Rogue or the Princess.

"Wait," Rogue instinctively started to shout. He thought that Nabarl was intending to use brute force to restrain the Princess and send her back. However...

"Among your troops, General Saian, there should be those who used to be the Crown Prince's Imperial Guards. I will be taking them into temporary custody."

Nabarl's unexpected words shocked him.

"W-What's the meaning of this?"

"An order from His Majesty."

When the Emperor was brought up, Rogue understood the reason for Nabarl's change in attitude. But even so, he could not comprehend the reason for the order.

The soldiers led by Gowen, in other words, the former sword slaves like Pashir and Miguel, and even Neil Tonson and Hou Ran, were hauled away.

"Wait..." but no matter what he tried, Nabarl would insistently bring out the fact that it was the Emperor's orders.

Gowen's expression was grim, but he did not put up any resistance. Perhaps because he had anticipated it beforehand, he did not seem particularly surprised that Ran, his adopted daughter, was there as well. Making large amounts of his favourite food had probably been the only way for Ran, who did not know how to write, to express her solicitude.

"These are soldiers I was entrusted with. Since you are treating them in this way, I expect a convincing explanation from you. Which will of course include what comes next for them." Glaring at Nabarl, Rogue started to utter words that were close to being a threat.

"Naturally," Nabarl nodded composedly.

Unable to comprehend the situation, the Princess could only stand there, unmoving, just as she had when Gowen and the others were being led away. Glancing at her, contempt flashed through Nabarl's eyes.

The sun had completely set.

Vileena and Rogue were in the fortress' dining room. Rogue had just come out of a conference with Nabarl. He had been hesitant, as the hour was already advanced, but thinking that the Princess would want to hear an explanation as soon as possible, he had gone to see her despite how late it was. Even so, it would not do for him to meet an unmarried woman alone in the dead of night, so he insisted on having the dining room for the use of officers be opened up.

For the same reason, a chamberlain and Theresia were also present. Having laid out alcohol and tea, they had then retreated to a distance at which they could not hear the two's conversation.

"What is going on?" asked Vileena, who had been waiting impatiently.

Rogue scratched through his grey hair. "I would like to ask that myself... Well, at this point, I don't understand it either." He wore a bemused expression.

Just before Vileena had flown out of Nedain, a messenger had come from Solon carrying these orders from the Emperor: "outfit three ships with weapons then hurry with them to Apta."

Without knowing anything more, he had rushed over, and Nabarl had been waiting. When he had subsequently heard the details from him, even Rogue, a long-serving general, had been taken aback.

The same, of course, held true for Vileena. "It can't be," she repeatedly murmured while listening to him talk.

Watching from a distance as Vileena's complexion turned red, then white as though from shock, Theresia worried that her mistress might be on the verge of collapse.

First of all, Nabarl had hurriedly been appointed as one of the twelve generals in Solon. He was filling the position left vacant by the rebel Zaat Quark, but

because the Blue Bow Division that Zaat had led was considered to have an inauspicious name, it was changed to the 'Blue Zenith Division'^[2].

And the first mission that he received as one of the twelve generals was, "Conquer Taúlia."

While Vileena was still reeling from that first shock, Rogue Saian followed up with a second one.

"And along with that... it seems that Oubary Bilan has been released from prison."

Chapter 5: Blown About in the Wind

Part 1

Vileena was on the highest floor of Apta Fortress.

Repairs were progressing steadily on the fortress that Prince Gil had once bombed. She had previously also looked over the town from a high position, but that had been the roof of the barracks. Shoulder to shoulder with Prince Gil, they had gazed out at the evening sky and at the town below.

It was still very early in the morning, but smoke was starting to rise from where breakfasts were being prepared. Low in the sky, a pale pink belt wreathed the nearby mountains and birds were fluttering about as though to follow that belt.

After hearing from Rogue about the contents of his conversation with Nabarl, Vileena had not been able to get a wink of sleep. That was how devastated she felt.

After several months in confinement, Oubary Bilan had been released. He was no longer a criminal, which meant that he had been cleared of the charge of assassinating Prince Gil.

Emperor Guhl Mephius' declaration before the imperial court had shocked a great many people, just as much as it had Vileena.

"Prince Gil's assassin was one of Taúlia's lackeys."

It was said that the information came from Oubary himself and from a spy that the Emperor had sent to the west. There were people in Taúlia who did not accept the alliance with Mephius and it was they who had hatched the plot.

Evidently, it was much the same as when Ryucown had risen to action in the princess' country, Garbera.

Maintaining "utmost goodwill", Emperor Guhl had sent a letter to Ax Bazgan. Hand over the criminals. If they did so, he would recognise that Taúlia had not been involved – was what the letter had said. "But that Bazgan cur flung my goodwill back in my face."

Shockingly, he had sent back the messenger's head.

In all likelihood, when Ax Bazgan had chosen reconciliation with Mephius, he had come under harsh attack from his retainers. Unable to curb their rash actions, and probably regretting his choice, Ax was absolutely unable to comply with Mephius' request for fear of even more criticism. If he showed any further weakness, his retainers might use it against him again. So, although this was not his actual wish, he had then no choice but to vent his anger on the messenger, declaring the request "completely groundless!"

The Emperor had decided to punish Taúlia. He had selected Nabarl, who had always advocated the conquest of Taúlia, to be the commander-in-chief of the subjugation army. And had also elevated him to the ranks of the twelve generals.

This had been a startling development even for the retainers closest to the Emperor. This revelation was the first anyone had heard of this exchange with Taúlia, and because it was so sudden, most people assumed that it was almost certainly untrue. Yet nobody objected.

Simon Rodloom's absence was huge. Moreover, even though Fedom's anti-Emperor faction had hurriedly come rushing to Solon, they had been so terrified of Guhl learning of their plans through Nabarl, that they had taken the initiative of actively voicing their support for the Emperor.

The matter was urgent, and the actions taken were correspondingly prompt. Perhaps because of concern that the townspeople would get wind of it, the force which had left Solon was only composed of seven hundred from Nabarl's newly-established Blue Zenith Division. The ones who were to assist them were Rogue and Odyne, precisely the two who were being kept away from Solon. Orders were sent for Rogue to prepare one battleship and two cruisers, for

Odyne to mobilise a reserve force of one thousand, and for both to lead them to Apta.

It can't be.

The reason for Nabarl having detained the Prince's Imperial Guards was because the inconvenient 'testimony' that they had given was far too removed from the 'truth' that the Emperor was bent on pushing through.

It can't be – This is absurd.

While gazing down at Apta at daybreak, Vileena shook her head agitatedly. Naturally, she also felt misgivings towards the Emperor's unexpected actions. Or rather than misgivings, it was closer to fury. It was perfectly obvious that the Emperor was taking advantage of the deadlock in relations between the three countries at the centre of the continent to distort the truth and seize the west.

Forgetting her position as princess, Vileena felt like slamming her fist against the parapet. After only a very short time in Mephius, she had learned to feel anxiety and distaste for a system in which so few people would offer council to the Emperor. And now again, it was like dark ripples spreading through her chest.

I...

It was certainly not to watch the army march on Taulia that she had come to Apta. She had come to search for a hint, no matter how slender, that the Prince might still be alive. Now however, in this situation of imminent war, that truly seemed like a little girl's childish sentimentality. War was something that swallowed and engulfed sentimentality as it spread wider.

Odyne Lorgo entered Apta the next day.

It had taken him some time because he had to mobilise his entire force, including his reserve troops. Unlike Rogue, since he had passed through villages and towns on his march, he had already heard that Nabarl was in Apta and that he had been made one of the twelve generals. That had, of course, given rise to various guesses and speculations; by the time he met Rogue in Apta, he had more or less prepared himself.

“I have of course given some thought to why His Majesty chose us.”

Odyne Lorgo was still only thirty-seven years old, but his expression was calm. Apart from the fact that he was a little straight-laced, Rogue had a good opinion of him as a military man.

“His Majesty must be aware that no matter what pretext he makes up, this war has no just cause. And that’s why he designated those who have already opposed him once.”

“...”

“We can no longer afford to disobey an imperial command, no matter what the order may be.” After saying that, Odyne swallowed.

Rogue had invited him to “have a drink together” and had wine brought to his chambers, but neither of them tried any of it yet.

Even though the town of Apta had just been filled to the brim with soldiers, it was strangely silent.

Both Rogue and Odyne had left their families in Solon. It was one of the commands they had received when they had been ordered to leave the capital. Both of them of course understood what that meant. So there was no need to say it.

Because of that, and out of mutual consideration, there were not that many topics that they could discuss directly. As they spoke together in subdued tones, it was hard to believe that the two of them were used to striding boldly through battlefields.

Rogue talked about how he had always thought that if he ever had a chance to go to Apta, he would like to go fishing in the River Yunos, while Odyne spoke about going to have a look at the forest where the Garberan army was said to have lain in ambush when they captured the fortress.

“Oh, you’re quite studious.”

“There’s that too, but...” Odyne’s lips curved so slightly it could not even be called a smile, “I like seeing places that have legends or historic events attached to them. I walk around them picturing various scenes. Tauran also has a lot of

ancient ruins, so originally, I would have wanted to visit it for a different reason.”

“Well that’s a surprising side to you. Er— that might have been rude of me.”

“It’s fine. Apparently, even my family sometimes sees me as an unfeeling block of wood.”

And finally,

“His Highness the Crown Prince,” as Odyne spoke, he put his hand to his neck as though it were a sword, “said something while pointing his sword at me: Are you somebody’s slave? Is it really that comfortable living without thinking of anything, only doing as you’re told?”

Rogue had no words to give in response. However, he did not pretend not to hear it. As proof of that, he poured some wine into the glasses that had remained empty the whole time and handed one to Odyne.

“To His Highness,” he said, raising his glass.

Odyne did the same.

“To His Highness.”

On the evening of the next day.

“Despicable,” Rogue Saian practically growled.

They were in Apta Fortress’ council room. The three generals Nabarl, Rogue, and Odyne were gathered in front of a table on which a map was spread out. Nabarl had just finished explaining his strategy and Rogue was unable to conceal his feelings.

Ordinarily, Nabarl did not have a particularly assertive personality. When Rogue, the oldest of the twelve generals, made that kind of judgement, he would have normally pulled backed.

“You may say as you will,” he said with a changed attitude, “This is the detailed strategy that His Majesty and I perfected together. Preparations for the vanguard unit of five hundred have already been made. For the rest, I am

simply waiting for the official notice.”

“A detailed strategy? It’s a strategy now to march on Taúlia without even declaring war?”

“I would ask you to watch your words.”

Nabarl seemed like a completely changed person. With the huge backing he had received, it was doubtful he would fear the gods themselves. He rotated his large neck and stared repeatedly from Rogue to Odyne.

“Taúlia has unquestionably attacked Apta without prior notice before. This will also serve as retribution. The country of Mephius will not be branded a coward.”

“What retribution? We’ve agreed to peace with them.”

“That peace was something that the Crown Prince arbitrarily decided. Taúlia’s Ax Bazgan is a cunning man. No doubt he glibly deceived the Prince, who was still young, and induced him to bind himself into a five-minute alliance. If we don’t discard it, Mephius’ diplomatic skill will be a laughing stock among foreign countries.”

“Bastard, this is an insult to His Highness’ last wishes and...”

“Sir Nabarl,” Odyne spoke as though to block Rogue, who was red in the face and shouting. He was about three years younger than Nabarl. The latter answered arrogantly, as though to say that his position too was now superior.

“What is it?”

“Even in the case of a surprise attack, the speed of Taúlia’s surrender is crucial.”

Odyne brought up Mephius’ invasion of Taúlia, over ten years ago, as an example. The people of Tauran were descended from nomadic tribes that worshipped the Dragon Gods and it was characteristic of them that, even though they competed amongst themselves, they would cooperate and fight together to an extraordinary degree when facing an outside enemy. Actually, back then, Mephius had gotten as far as occupying Taúlia for a while; however on the behest of Ax Bazgan, who had managed to escape with the support of

his relatives, and of the strategist Ravan Dol, the various powers of Tauran had joined in an alliance and had attacked the Mephian army from three sides.

Because of their unexpected speed, Mephius had not had time to lay out a defensive line or put up a resistance; in the end, they abandoned Taúlia and fled home.

“Thus we need sufficient resources to ensure that Taúlia falls quickly. Adopting an aggressive stance is fine, but wouldn’t you say that having our cooperation is vital?”

Coming from Odyne, this was a kind of threat. Having received the Emperor’s command, both Odyne and Rogue’s families would be in danger if they refused to participate in the war. The commander-in-chief however was Nabarl. If he was unable to integrate Rogue or Odyne and if the invasion of Taúlia ended in failure, Nabarl would naturally be the one to bear the responsibility.

“If neither of you are interested, that is also fine.”

“What?”

Nabarl’s face was as cool as ever as he turned his scornful gaze towards each of the two generals in turn.

“By all means, relax and sip tea here in Apta. I will manage the whole thing myself and invite you to see the results in the end. Ah, but of course, that is also what I will report to His Majesty.”

For a second, both Rogue and Odyne were left speechless.

Mounting an attack without a declaration of war was proof that he was not making light of Taúlia’s military strength. Yet even so, he was saying that he would capture it with his own troop of only seven hundred?

This fellow — Rogue stared intently at Nabarl — did he catch hold of some kind of information about the West? No, he’s been advocating attacking Taúlia for years. If someone had caught hold of it, that...

Could it be His Majesty?

For some reason, he felt unfamiliar chills crawl up his body. Without confiding in any of his retainers, the Emperor had probably had his sights set on the west

since long ago. While gathering minute information, he had patiently awaited his chance. And for Guhl Mephius, the Crown Prince's death had represented an unparalleled opportunity. Essentially, Taúlia was vulnerable to an air force, so Rogue Saian's airships should have been indispensable for a swift victory. Nabarl, however, seemed extremely confident in his plan. Rather than going through the trouble of dealing with allies who were not keen on his strategy, he had determined that it would be more advantageous to act alone. In a way, it was a decisiveness worthy of a warrior. "Well then, we will watch," said Odyne. "Please leave the rearguard to us."

"As you wish," to the end, Nabarl maintained his cocksure attitude.

Upon leaving the council room, Nabarl headed straight for a large room beneath the barracks. About twenty of the former Imperial Guards were being held there. He called for one of them.

He had, of course, been disarmed and was almost naked, but from the pressure he gave off, it seemed like at any moment, he might tear through Nabarl's windpipe with his teeth.

The runner-up in that year's gladiatorial tournament, the swordsman who had taken the position of the hero Felipe for his own – Pashir.

Nabarl spoke dismissively, "You... it seems you fought splendidly on the battlefield alongside the Prince."

"..."

"I'll have the equipment of the Blue Zenith Division prepared for you at once. I am giving you a chance to shine again. If you do, maybe your friends' treatment will change a bit."

Pashir had no say in the matter. He was immediately led away by one of the officers and fitted out with weapons and armour. A weapon that he was not specialised in, a bow, was slung over his shoulder. The armour was also somewhat overdone, clearly more for ceremonial use than for actual combat.

It was a whim of Nabarl's.

The newly-established Blue Zenith Division consisted not only of the mercenaries, now elevated to regular soldiers, who had been working for him, but also many sent from the mercenary units of other divisions. Having the Felipe from the gladiatorial tournament at his beck and call was a way of showing those newcomers his status. Additionally, he calculated that even those who had been under his command for a long time would be far more enthusiastic than usual at being able to lord it over this man, who had jumped up from being a gladiator.

Pashir would eventually be executed as a criminal who had concealed the cause of the Crown Prince's death. To Nabarl's way of thinking, he should make use of him while he could.

Part 2

Rumour had it that he had been in a cheerful mood of late.

He was a man who was usually strict as an ogre with his men and would rarely crack jokes or laugh; but recently, he called out to the people when he was out on patrol in the town and thanked the soldiers for their efforts during their training.

But then, it was only natural. The war with Garda's army, which had run rampant for so long in the west, had finally drawn to a close; and Princess Esmena, who had disappeared during Raswan Bazgan's uprising, had returned safely by air carrier just the other day.

He must be feeling like the dark clouds that had been hanging over Taúlia had completely cleared away.

Yet Bouwen Tedos' thoughts were not as uncomplicated as other people believed. Or better said, his feelings were very much mixed.

Having been wounded at the battle of the Coldrin Hills, he had not been able to take part in the punitive force against Garda's aforementioned army; and to make matters worse, a sorcerer had crept into the castle and kidnapped Esmena. Far from having anything to be proud of, as a warrior, he carried shame and endless regrets.

However, the one who should be in charge of Taúlia's defence, Toún Bazgan – Ax Bazgan's younger brother and Raswan's father – had, in response to his son's rebellion, voluntarily placed himself under house arrest– “until my brother returns and hands down an official sentence”

The one in charge could not appear before the soldiers and populace with a gloomy face, so Bouwen was acting as though he was in a good mood.

As was now normal, he was patrolling the neighbouring villages.

Everyone had radiant expressions. The working men had been taken for soldiers and their food reserves had been commandeered for army provisions, so their living conditions were far from easy, yet the eyes that looked up towards Bouwen on his horse, were shining as they unanimously congratulated him on victory.

Among them, there were even those who held up tiny amounts of alcohol and meat from animals they had caught in the mountains, saying it was “for the soldiers.”

Bouwen smiled from the bottom of his heart.

I'm just not used to being a hero. What am I going to do if I get worried about every little thing? The people indomitably face every day. It's our job to protect their way of life.

Realising that anew, he passed through Taúlia's gate when dusk was already near, and noticed that the town seemed a little changed. A soldier came rushing up and informed him of the reason. *Oh!*

The Fifth Army Corps that Bouwen led had practically been annihilated, but the only troop within it that was currently still combat-worthy had apparently just returned from Eimen. In other words, the mercenary platoon led by Orba, the one who had killed Garda.

I see, it's the hero's return.

The atmosphere in the town and castle was euphoric.

When Bouwen entered the castle, another person came rushing up to him. Since this person's presence was both utterly unexpected and yet, in a sense predictable, Bouwen once more felt mixed feelings.

The one bowing in greeting was Esmena's head lady's maid.

Orba, who had gone back from bandages to a mask just before returning to Taúlia, received a warmer welcome than ever before in its streets. The story of the swordsman who had defeated the sorcerer seemed to have reached even here, in a town far-distant from Eimen.

Overflowing crowds of people lined both sides of the street, reminding Orba of how he had once ridden along this road next to Ax as Prince Gil. It had been the day after Taúlia and Mephius had agreed to peace. That time too, the people had greeted them warmly.

Near Orba, who was in the lead, were the mercenaries from Taúlia, followed by those who were from other parts of Tauran. Shique, Gilliam and the other foreign mercenaries were at the back of the line. The reason for that went without saying. On Shique's advice, Orba had also tied a banner with the crest of Taúlia to his horse.

The shouts of joy showed no sign of ending. Several children who looked like they had received instructions from the adults ran over to Orba. When he bent down while on horseback, a girl stood on tiptoes to pass a garland of flowers around his neck, while a boy held up a wineskin filled with alcohol.

Orba raised it to the sky.

"To Lord Ax!" He cried, then tossed back his head and gulped down the wine.

The cheers and applause became thunderous. The masked swordsman was, without any possible doubt, a hero to the west.

Yet – when that hero entered the castle, he kept the soldiers and leaders of Taúlia, who were eager to hear his war stories, at arm's length, saying:

"Let me rest for a bit."

In his place, Gilliam, Shique and the other mercenaries were in great demand throughout the town. Although, in a certain sense, those who were from Taúlia were even greater heroes than Orba. When they went back to their families, they found themselves being welcomed by all their relatives and crowds of their neighbours.

Meanwhile, Orba secluded himself in his room and was finally alone for the first time in a long while. He took off his mask and glanced through the window. Outside, the evening shadows were growing longer. There were many round towers in Taúlia, and their towering black shapes rose throughout the townscape.

Well...

Perhaps because they were not so far apart, it overlapped in his mind with the evening sky he had once gazed at in Apta.

Orba took the sword that he had just removed from his belt and drew it out of its sheath, so that the light from the window fell on it. It was the short sword he always carried at his waist. The glowing red light set ablaze the name carved into the blade.

Orba.

The name of a boy born in a Mephian village that was itself nameless.

The name of a gladiator who had also been called by the nickname “Iron Tiger” in the amphitheatre.

The name of a man who, in the past year, had become known for his services as an Imperial Guard to Mephius’ Crown Prince, Gil Mephius.

And here in the west, the name of the hero whose fame had spread explosively after he had, under Ax Bazgan’s command, splendidly struck down the sorcerer Garda.

But...

Orba slowly re-sheathed the sword. The light that had been reflecting into his eyes vanished, and as though to replace it, a breeze from the window caressed the bare skin of his face.

If he felt like it, he could choose a different name. All he had to do was to not wear the mask when in public and introduce himself by this new name; he would then find himself in a completely different position than the one he stood in now.

It would mean throwing away many things. Along with that, he would also be burdening himself with many things. And above all else, he would be exposing himself to an untold number of dangers.

It would virtually be choosing the path of ruin after working so hard to receive the honours of a hero.

But –

That’s the only way to get what I want – he felt intensely. And it was equally

certain that, even if it seemed insignificant next to the personal danger and countless responsibilities, it was still the only thing that Orba currently wanted.

“Sir Orba.”

Just then, a messenger from Bouwen arrived. It was time to put on the mask again.

Bouwen had invited Orba to the rooms reserved for the general, in the topmost part of the now largely deserted Fifth Army Corps barracks.

“Although it’s not much in the way of hospitality for a hero...”

Bouwen said with a smile. Indeed, there were only a few simple dishes of chicken and vegetables lined up next to a single bottle of wine.

Bouwen first praised his achievement of having killed Garda, then thanked him for the great help he had given Govenor-General Ax.

To which Orba answered, “I was blessed with the fortunes of war.”

After which, Bouwen said, "Speaking of the fortunes of war, you saved me at the Coldrin Hills too. At the time, I was more than half resigned that my luck had run out.”

“It was Captain Duncan’s order. Also, as our commanding officer, he showed us what it means to be dignified to the end,” Orba answered.

Neither of them were talkative men, nor had the habit of drinking large amounts, so there were many long periods of silence. It was not an uncomfortable silence however, Bouwen would occasionally ask about the war and Orba would answer noncommittally. At the story of the magic trap that Garda had laid in Kadyne, Bouwen was unable to hide his surprise.

"It's said that there're many sorcerers in Ende and Allion. If they can effectively use that kind of magic, their battlefields must be very different from the ones I know."

"I don't know much about it, but apparently the Dragon Gods temples in the cities that Garda's army occupied were altered in some way. Using large-scale sorcery probably requires equally large-scale preparations. Just like how you

need a lot of ether to fly a lot of airships."

"I see. So it's not like the almighty power of legends," Bouwen nodded deeply.

The sun slowly set and the lamps were lit inside the room. A long time passed, and just as the wine bottle was finally about to be emptied, Bouwen once more began to talk.

"The truth is, there's someone who very much wants to see you."

It looked like Bouwen was intending to go about things in a roundabout way, but Orba could guess who that person was from the respectful tone Bouwen used to talk about them.

"Princess Esmena... Is that who you mean?"

"You catch on fast. Exactly right. She says that she doesn't want to force you but, she would sincerely like you to go and see her, even if only once."

Bouwen tried to look expressionless. Although, since he was at heart honest, even an outsider could have seen through it. Orba, however, had no attention to spare and failed to notice the other's complicated feelings. He could imagine why Esmena might want to see him in person.

Normally, he would be thinking – *How do I get out of this?* However, for some reason, the only thought he now had at a time like this was – *So it's come.*

Orba sighed behind his mask.

"Understood. I will meet with her," he said.

Part 3

“Will someone tell me what on earth has gotten into all of you?”

Within her chambers, Esmena Bazgan stared in bemusement at her ladies’ maids, who had been kicking up a fuss for some time now. Some of them were rushing about in groups while others were brandishing their brooms like weapons. It was enough to make her wonder if there had been a repeat of that nightmarish uprising that had happened only a few days ago.

“Princess, is it not you who should tell us what has happened?”

The ladies’ maids snorted angrily.

“Why would you even think of inviting that insolent wretch again?”

They meant Orba. That afternoon, he was supposed to come to this room within the inner quarters.

He had previously been invited here before the battle in Helio; at that time he had spoken sneeringly of Gil, whom Esmena still yearned for. Wild with fury, something which was extremely rare for her, Esmena had driven him out then wept loudly.

“Stop this commotion, its unbecoming of you all. The Princess has her position to consider,” the head lady’s maid chided the younger ones. She was the same one who had informed Bouwen that Esmena wished to meet with Orba. “Sir Orba is now a hero whose name is known throughout the west. He is also the one who was responsible for rescuing the Princess.”

“But that...”

The ladies’ maids pulled unhappy faces. They knew nothing of war, and it was impossible for them to suddenly believe that the insolent and eerie young man who hid his own face was the hero who had defeated Garda. The head lady’s maid continued solemnly –

“The Princess has no choice but to invite him before her and say a few words of gratitude. No matter how wicked and arrogant his true personality might be... Even though he might be crafty and deceitful... No matter how distressing or terrifying it is for the Princess... Even though doing so makes her blood boil, her position carries responsibilities which...”

“Really, you’re all exaggerating,” Esmena found it impossible not to laugh.

The one who actually felt like it made her blood boil was the head lady’s maid.

After all that, Esmena once again gathered her maids together and said –

“I have something to ask of you all.”

“What can we do for you?”

“Please be at ease. We will not leave your side.”

“I may not look like it, but my father drilled me in martial arts. At the first hint of insolence, I will smash that mask from behind and...”

Facing the ladies’ maids who were working themselves up into a frenzy, Esmena smiled.

“No. I would like you to leave me alone with him.”

Orba arrived at her chambers exactly on time. He walked in feeling that the ladies’ maids, who came out to greet him, had looked at him with terrible expressions.

Esmena Bazgan, the beautiful princess of Taúlia, was sitting at a table in the centre of the room on which snacks had been laid.

“Princess. I hope you have been doing well.”

Orba started off inoffensively. Esmena had been carried away to Eimen and been subjected to Garda’s loathsome sorcery. From what Orba had seen at the time, it looked as though her heart was being controlled.

“I have. I can think with my own mind and move my own body as I please. But because everyone here wants to treat me like an invalid, I’ve gone along with it

a bit.”

Esmena, who was speaking laughingly, certainly looked well. Compared to how haggard she had been the last time he was invited to this room, or while she was kidnapped by the sorcerer, she seemed much healthier.

“How about you? You were not wounded during the fighting?”

“I’m as you see.”

“Hmm, but since you wear a mask, ‘as I see’ does not tell me much.”

“R-right.”

Orba was still standing at attention in front of the giggling Esmena.

Weird – he was puzzled by the atmosphere surrounding her.

At her invitation, he sat down opposite her. Here in the west, no matter how hospitable they might be towards guests, it was rare to find oneself seated at the same level as a country’s princess. He was even more surprised when, after they had finished laying out the alcohol and tea, the ladies’ maids bowed and left the room.

As soon as they had left –

“There is no one else in this room,” Esmena said. “There is also no one hiding to listen in. If you doubt me, please feel free to search this entire room.”

“What is it you want to say?”

A different atmosphere than earlier now surrounded Esmena as she sat directly opposite him, and for some reason, Orba felt self-conscious. It was not hostility. But it was not a friendly atmosphere either. It could perhaps be described as a certain kind of eagerness.

“Sir Orba.”

“Yes.”

“Won’t you show me your face?”

A swaying motion.

Orba saw something move in the corner of his eye. A curtain rustling in a

gentle breeze.

“My face,” Orba repeated once the curtain had stopped moving.

“Yes,” Esmena nodded.

Her unwavering eagerness surged along with the wind, but her limpid eyes remained gentle. Orba did not say anything more.

To say that confusion raged like a storm through his breast – would be a lie. Orba’s mind was curiously calm.

Some time passed.

Esmena rose from her seat. Orba’s eyes followed her movements. She approached him.

And passed by his side. Beyond his field of vision, he could feel Esmena’s presence behind him. Slender brown fingers took hold of his mask.

As though taking part in a solemn ceremony, with movements that were perfectly calm and natural, Orba’s hand quietly stopped those fingers.

Esmena went rigid, as though she had received an electric shock. Orba stood up too.

Including the time to turn around, it could not have been more than a few seconds, but each had experienced several dozen sensations in that time.

Orba took the mask in his own fingers.

Several more seconds passed.

The curtain swayed and wind once more caressed his bare skin.

Orba’s hand had only slightly shifted the mask, but Esmena’s gaze was riveted to him almost frantically until suddenly, quickly, she averted her eyes.



“It’s... It’s enough,” she said sharply.

The Princess limply fell back down. Her shoulders shook. For a short while, Orba focused his gaze on the governor-general of Taúlia’s daughter, but before long, he fixed his mask back in place.

The desolate wind sang of bone-chilling coldness and cruelty to the young pair.

And with it, it seemed to carry a burning heartache.

After a while...

“I will not ask you about your circumstances,” said Esmena, with an expression like one who was holding back their anger. Her eyes were still turned away from Orba. Just as with her shoulders were, her lips quivered as words spilled from them. “Even if I were to ask you, I’m sure someone like me would not possibly be able to understand. You lived and came rushing to Taúlia when it was in danger. That is what I believe. Even if you were now to set Taúlia alight with your own hands, I could not resent you.”

“...”

“I will tell no one, of course. I swear to you, on my name of Esmena Bazgan. So please... p-please, trust me. I, Esmena, am small and cowardly, but this I will protect even with my own life.” Her long eyelashes trembled incessantly. Orba did not say anything in response. From the window behind her, he could see the same cluster of towers that he had gazed at the previous evening, but from a different angle. From here, they looked like five fingers reaching out to grasp the heavens.

Esmena stood up again.

“Mercenary Captain Orba,” she called him by that name.

“Aye,” Orba once again stood to attention.

“You greatly helped my father and splendidly slayed the sorcerer Garda. For steadfastly protecting the west, as the princess of Taúlia, and as a woman of this land, I both praise you for your achievements, and thank you.”

Her eyes shining, Esmena smiled. Orba simply bowed his head.

As the Princess' eyelashes trembled once more, a single teardrop trickled from beneath them...

It was more than an hour after Orba had left that the ladies' maids were allowed to return to the room. Even with so much time, Esmena's eyes were still red and swollen.

"Oh gracious!"

The ladies' maids once more raised an uproar.

"What did that scoundrel say to you?"

"Now that he's a hero, he must be even more insolent than before."

"If I see him again, I won't let him off this time."

"Princess, what is making you smile? Princess..."

That evening.

A little after Orba's unit, fifty soldiers led by Natokk – commander of the Sixth Army Corps – returned to Taúlia. He first greeted Bouwen and Nidhal, the commander of the Third Army Corps who had arrived back earlier. Then he went to find the strategist, Ravan Dol, who was currently undergoing medical treatment, carrying with him a verbal message from Ax.

Orba of course knew nothing of that errand.

He was doing his best to play the part of the merry-making 'hero' before Gilliam and the others brought it up. Once, with Shique playing the part of his opponent, he had re-enacted the scene of Garda being slain for the young soldiers.

With plenty of added flourishes, naturally.

"No... to think that the West could band together as one so quickly! Damn you, Ax Bazgan, I underestimated you!" Garda said, coughing up blood, then collapsed.

Although Orba thought that it was complete nonsense, he was also deeply aware that this kind of thing was necessary.

Following Ax's instructions, Nidhal had already held two days of celebration in Taúlia, and with the food and drink left over from that time, he treated Orba's unit and the soldiers they had invited to a feast.

Additionally, that day, Esmena Bazgan had also attended the banquet. Because ordinarily the princess did not readily go to places where only men gathered, the festivities grew livelier than ever.

When the graceful beauty walked by, a faint scent of flowers seemed to drift in the air. Even though the atmosphere surrounding her was the same as ever, the men talked together excitedly.

Doesn't she seem to have changed somehow?

Yeah. It's like she's grown up all at once.

The Princess is already nineteen.

Right, when I got married, my wife was also nineteen. So she's already at that age, huh...

Some of them grew solemn and for some reason, their shoulders started to droop.

Perhaps because Governor-General Ax had raised her overprotectively, Esmena had always seemed young for her age; but now when she appeared in public, although her manners were modest, there was no doubt that the woman of the Bazgan House sitting in the seat of honour was an adult. In their clumsy hearts, the men were glad of that, but felt a little bereft at the same time.

The leading role at the feast was of course reserved for the new hero, Orba. Esmena had personally expressed her gratitude towards him, whereupon several Taúlian warriors turned green with envy, thinking – “if it was going to come to this, even if it cost a life or two, I should have been in Eimen to defeat Garda myself” – even as they smiled towards him.

Afterwards, while the light from the bonfire in the garden illuminated his iron mask, Orba respectfully presented the longsword which had killed Garda to the Princess.

“Still, Mephian gladiators are pretty capable.”

The Taúlian soldiers muttered, deeply impressed.

“Since we’re at peace with Mephius now, we might soon have gladiator shows put on here in the west too.”

“If that happens, locals will be invited to take part too, no?”

“How about trying it out? You’re pretty confident about your sword skills, right? Maybe you’ll get to catch up to the hero.”

“D-Don’t be stupid. I’m not afraid of dying on the battlefield but to kill or be killed for entertainment... no thanks.”

Sitting in at a corner of the banquet, Bouwen listened to his men talking with a wry smile.

They had fought for a long time with Mephius, with which they shared a border. Moreover, the Bazgan House was originally from Mephius and they had once outmanoeuvred its emperor by founding the nation of Zer Tauran, from which the current Taúlia had emerged after the country had split apart. With those origins, even if they were now at peace, it would not be easy to sever their fated enmity with Mephius.

But –

Taken the other way, it was a fact that Mephian blood flowed through the veins of the Bazgan family. That much could not be denied. By using that fact to skilfully guide people’s sympathies, even the deep ditch that lay between them and Mephius might eventually be bridged.

And so, what’re we going to do with that hard-to-handle man?

Feeling the urge to give another bitter smile, Bouwen looked at Orba from a distance. The problem he posed was a delicate one. If used well, there would be no better way to build a bridge with Mephius; but, if they handled him the wrong way, far from being a hero, he might suddenly become a target of hatred for the people of Tauran.

Since, after all, the risk of war was subsiding in the west, and heroes are not needed in times of peace.

While Bouwen was worrying his head with those complicated thoughts, a soldier rushed up to him just as the banquet was starting to wind down.

“What?”

As soon as the soldier whispered in his ear, Bouwen completely forgot the concerns that had been going through his mind. He immediately took his leave of Esmena and hurried away.

His expression as he left the banquet was tense.

An event entirely beyond his expectations had occurred.

Chapter 6: A Traitor's Banner of Justice

Part 1

At around the time when the sun was starting to descend from its zenith, the Garberan princess was once more standing where she could look out over Apta. She could see a sprinkling of townspeople in the streets. During the day, when Vileena had seen them as she walked along the covered gallery facing the streets, their expressions had been truly heart-breaking.

Prince Gil had been the lord protecting Apta for only a very short time.

Nonetheless, Gil had first driven back a sudden surprise attack by Taúlia, and then, thanks to the clever ploy of evacuating the people and bombing his own position, he had captured Ax Bazgan and had immediately concluded peace. On top of that, he had left from Apta to help their ally Garbera during a crisis, then had once more returned to this fortress in triumph. The people had all welcomed him with loud acclamations.

Not surprisingly, they saw Prince Gil as a hero. They probably mourned his death far more than did the people living in Solon or the nobles at court.

What should I do?

The previous night, she had lain in bed but, just like the night before, had been largely unable to sleep. According to General Rogue, Nabarl was steadily advancing in his military preparations and might be departing for the front as early as tomorrow or even today.

If they invade Taúlia despite being bound by a peace agreement and without any declaration of war...

Would Mephius retain even the minimum amount of dignity that a country should have?

Besides which, as he had been the one to offer peace to the west, she also believed that Gil Mephius' name would be smeared in mud. Furthermore, if the lie took hold in Mephius that the west had assassinated Gil and if it came to be seen as the truth, the former Imperial Guards who were now being confined would be in danger. If lies about them having conspired with the west were to circulate, there was a good chance that they would be executed.

Flying by airship, would it be possible to give Taúlia warning of Mephius' invasion? She even wondered.

If Taúlia were aware of the planned attack and made proper preparations against it, Nabarl might be more cautious about moving his troops.

But if she were to do something like that, Vileena would not be able to avoid being branded a traitor. She feared that she would be banished, or otherwise punished for her crime, not only by Mephius, but also by its ally, Garbera.

Grandfather...

Vileena quickly drove away thoughts of her grandfather whose face had suddenly appeared in her mind. It was a bad habit of hers to go running to her grandfather, Jeorg, every time something worried her too much.

Just when the princess was once again asking herself what she should do, a voice called out from behind her.

"May I bother you, Princess?"

When she turned around, she saw a man with characteristically dishevelled hair. He was a master blacksmith by the name of Sodan.

"I don't know if it's alright for someone like me to talk directly to a princess like this so, I'm sorry if it's rude."

Perhaps it was part of his nature to not be very good at speaking, since his somewhat cloudy eyes were darting around all over the place. Vileena tilted her head to one side.

"It doesn't matter. What can I do for you?"

“The fact is...”

As Sodan continued talking, Vileena doubted her own ears.

“The fact is... I have something that I’m keeping for the Prince.”

“T-That,” Vileena almost spluttered unconsciously, “what is it? Is it a letter for me? When was it given to you? How did you receive it?” She fired off her questions in rapid succession.

So this *was* all part of one of the Prince’s strategies and he had left something behind to tell her about it when the time came – for one short second, Vileena was able to convince herself of that.

“Ah, no, it’s not a letter... It’s this.”

Sodan held out a package in his chapped and scalded palm. Something glittering peeped through from inside. Vileena almost snatched it from his hands but when she saw the parcel’s unexpected contents, she was left speechless.

“I got a request to fix it but... now, there’s no way for me to give it back anymore. I don’t really know myself if giving it to you, Princess, is the proper thing to do.”

Sodan had experienced this before. Handing something over to someone who then stood stock still, for some reason, staring at it fixedly without saying a word. Gil Mephius had done so and, just like Gil, Vileena did not seem to notice when Sodan left but remained there for a while longer, her head bowed.

In Vileena’s hand was a medallion on a chain that the princess, herself, had once given to the imperial guard, Orba. She had sent it as a proof of friendship for him, who would be taking part in the gladiatorial tournament.

It had also protected the Prince from a bullet shot by the rebel Zaat Quark. Although it should have been handed to Orba, it seemed that the Prince taken it “as a lucky charm”. It seemed probable that he had asked a master blacksmith here in Apta to repair it before returning it to his imperial guard.

A horse and sword, the crest of Garbera, were engraved on the medallion’s surface. A single transparent teardrop fell onto it.

The Princess' platinum blond hair swept forward and hung down, concealing her expression. But it could not conceal the sound of her weeping as the teardrops continued to rain down on the medallion.

After all this time – right, even after all this time, a heavy sense of loss welled up within her heart.

Is this what I came to Apta for? She wondered.

Not to look for Prince Gil's trail, but to experience with certainty the reality of Gil Mephius' death.

She would never see those mysterious eyes of his again; she would never see his smile, with its trace of boyishness, again.

She would never drive him into a corner, or conversely, have her nose put out of joint by him again. She would have no other chance to try to get closer to his heart, or to be infuriated by his secretive way of doing things.

Images of Prince Gil, the masked swordsman Orba, and Shique swirled around and around in her mind.

Vileena finally collapsed to her knees and seemed about to abandon herself to her emotions and cry out loud.

And that was when –

Something strange suddenly struck her tear-filled vision. A glittering line seemed to be weaving its way through the streets of Apta.

A group of armed soldiers. They looked like they were going to depart from the town's north gate. A military troop automatically suggested some kind of emergency, but there were no townspeople in sight to see them off.

The surprise attack? Vileena guessed.

In that moment, the bottomless sense of loss within her heart felt as though it were being filled by another strong emotion.

It was Prince Gil Mephius who had chosen friendship with the west. He had bombed his own fortress and then personally gone to Taúlia; all because it had been necessary to remove the threat from the rear when going to help Vileena's own native country, Garbera.

A tear ran down her cheek. With a sudden jerk, she wiped it away with the back of her fist and raised her head.

I did not come to Apta simply to wallow in grief.

If by some chance she had been led there by fate, then there was something that she needed to do here in Apta. Vileena Owell placed the medallion around her neck and before she realised it, she had started to run.

Countless doubts and conflicts still filled her heart. As though to crush them underfoot, she took a firm step forward and continued to run.

The River Yunos separated Mephius and Taúlia east from west. Vegetation growing along them, the cliffs on either side of the river rose ever higher as one went west and about a hundred Taúlian border guards were permanently stationed at the top of them. Following the ridge even further west were the Gajira Plains where Mephius' Prince Gil and Taúlia's Lord Ax had once met in conference.

Since the reconciliation between Mephius and Taúlia, the area around the River Yunos had become very quiet, but that day, for the first time in a long time, the guards all grew tense. There was a report that armed soldiers had been sighted on the opposite bank. Naturally, they were Mephian troops. It had been confirmed that a large number of boats had been launched across the river.

There was also a report that a ship had flown down towards Apta from the north. Since it carried no weapons though, it was probably not a warship. Nobody knew what to make of it.

Just as the captain of the guards was preparing to get in touch with Taúlia, the soldiers were thrown into complete confusion. An airship had been sighted crossing the River Yunos and headed towards them.

"At the ready!"

Following the captain's orders, soldiers armed with guns formed an orderly row at the top of the hill.

Having apparently anticipated this, the Mephian airship, which was shaped like a wyvern, rapidly lost altitude and landed right in front of the riflemen. The reason why they did not immediately open threatening fire was because the pilot was clearly a woman. As proof that she was in no way hostile, that woman spread her arms wide on either side of her.

Five or six soldiers, their guns still at the ready, surrounded her. Then one of them rushed to the captain.

“What?”

Not surprisingly, the captain’s expression was the very picture of bewilderment. The pilot had identified herself as the Garberan princess Vileena Owell and her errand –

“Mephius is going to invade?”

– Was to bring advance information.

The only reason he did not write it off as complete nonsense was because of the Mephian troops on the opposite shore. He had certainly been anxious about whether they were preparing to ford the river.

But neither did he know whether this person was really the Garberan princess. There was a risk that the woman’s information was itself a trap.

Still, either way, it did not change the fact that the situation was urgent. The captain of the border guards went to meet directly with the Princess and talked with her for a moment. As the result, he reached a decision.

“This is beyond my authority. Dohrai! Choose three of your men and guide the Princess to Taúlia.”

As per these orders, Dohrai and the three other men were to take the woman who called herself Vileena – who was of course the real Vileena Owell – to Taúlia by airship.

“Please be careful,” the swarthy-skinned Dohrai called out to her just before the airships were about to take off together.

“I have some confidence in my piloting. Please do not worry,” the girl answered, but Dohrai, his expression serious, pointed to the handgun that hung

from his waist.

The girl's cheeks tensed. Although he was young, Dohrai had grown a truly splendid beard. The mouth that was surrounded by that beard did not speak the words, but the warning was there. *If you act suspiciously, I have orders to shoot you.* That "be careful" included the meaning of "be careful what you do."

Vileena's airship took off, with Dohrai and his men surrounding it on all sides. Stopping to replenish their ether at a relay base on the way, they hurried towards Taúlia.

They arrived at the city just as the sun was about to set. Things being what they were, and so that the Princess would attract as little attention as possible, just before they entered Taúlia, she was asked to change from her flightsuit to the simple clothes of a Taúlian girl and was covered in the veil that unmarried women sometimes wore.

They passed through the gate and entered the town.

"Keep your face lowered," Dohrai advised her.

It was the first time Vileena came to this land, but of course, there was no leeway for her to view her surroundings. So she walked forward, watching only her own feet.

There must be a banquet going on somewhere since she could hear the sound of laughter, singing and the beating of a drum carried on the wind.

They continued along the town's streets and this time, her ears caught the rough whinnying of a horse. The horse stopped just next to their party, its front legs suspended in the air.

"What?" Dohrai glared agitatedly at the rider.

That other person's laughter was like a clap of thunder.

"I'm on my way to buy wine. But everywhere I go, they've run out."

"It's right after a war. People can't be too extravagant."

"My unit rendered the most distinguished service, you know? We got warmer welcomes in the other places. It's complete bullshit that Taúlia is overflowing with hospitality."

He spoke with insolence but he seemed to be the kind of man that no one could hate. Dohrai gave a crooked smile –

“Go visit old Hamdi’s shop on Third Street. That old man’s a boozier himself. He should have some left over that isn’t meant for customers. He loves war stories, so if you tell him a few, he’ll let you have some.”

“Thanks.”

“Is it an order from your captain?”

“Our captain doesn’t know how to have fun. He found a woman he liked in Eimen, so I thought he might’ve loosened up a bit, but, yeah.”

The man’s laughter boomed like a gong as he galloped off again.

“Isn’t that...?” Asked one of Dohrai’s men.

“Yeah, it is,” Dohrai answered while he urged the Princess to continue on. “That kind of giant isn’t seen in Taúlia. I bet the quantities he drinks are impressive. His name’s Gilliam, isn’t it?”

Gilliam?

Something brushed against Vileena’s mind. That name rang a bell. She also felt that she remembered having heard the voice from earlier before.

With that being said, she was on an important errand. Her increasing nervousness as they approached Taúlia castle drove any speculation about Gilliam right out of her head.

It was Bouwen Tedos who received her.

As previously mentioned, despite his youth, he was currently the one in charge in Taúlia.

Princess Vileena is here with information about an invasion from Mephius. Even when he heard it from the soldier, it was too sudden for Bouwen to believe it. On top of that, only moments earlier, he had been thinking about how they would be strengthening their ties with Mephius from here on.

Still, he was from the war-torn land of Tauran. It was not rare to suddenly be

at war with yesterday's ally.

By the time he left his seat at the banquet, Bouwen's feelings had completely changed.

During the war against Mephius, for a while, Bouwen had been held captive in Apta, but he had had no opportunity to meet Princess Vileena in person. Which was why he sent for Natokk, who had arrived in Taúlia not long after Orba's unit. The commander of the Sixth Army Corps had in the past gone to Apta as Princess Esmena's guard, and so had met Princess Vileena.

"That is, without a doubt, Garbera's princess, Vileena Owell, in person," that self-same Natokk assured him.

Bouwen entered one of the rooms in the castle to meet with her.

Oh, she... Upon seeing her, he felt his eyes go wide.

A girl with regular features who was beautiful to behold. Although her countenance had a childlike innocence, he could sense the graceful dignity behind it. In a few years' time, she would certainly grow into a beauty on par with Esmena Bazgan.

And yet, this princess who should have been at court being admired, had come with information that Mephius' army was marching towards them. This was not a normal situation. According to what she said, hundreds of soldiers had already left Apta.

However, there had yet to be a report of a beacon being lit at the border. Even so, he did not believe that the princess who had crossed the border was lying.

"Princess," after listening intently to her words, Bouwen pressed his fingers together on top of the table, "I am deeply grateful for you coming all the way here with this report. However, you are a princess of Garbera, Mephius' ally. Won't your actions risk compromising both your position and Garbera's?"

The Princess lowered her head for a moment but then immediately lifted her eyes again.

"But leaving things as they were would have gone against all sense of justice. I

sincerely wish for peace between both countries... just as my husband-to-be Prince Gil did.”

Her husband.



The way she gave that justification was very girlish. And in a way, that made Bouwen trust her more than anything else had.

“I understand. What will you do now?”

“I will return to Mephius,” answered Vileena, unfaltering and unhesitating. “Of course, if you prefer that I stay here until you have verified my words, I will do so.”

That was almost like saying that she would remain as a hostage. Bouwen closed his eyes. And then said –

“Prince Gil pledged his friendship to my liege, Ax Bazgan. Imprisoning his fiancée would be inconceivable. Dohrai will escort you.”

But – Bouwen could not help but think – returning to Mephius will be far more dangerous than staying here in Taúlia.

That was of course something that Vileena knew as well.

Part 2

After the Garberan princess had left, things suddenly got busy for Bouwen.

He first reported to Ravan Dol, who was confined to bed, and to Toún Bazgan, who was in voluntary confinement within his own chambers; then he personally reconfirmed the military manpower currently available within Taúlia.

The city's Defence Force, led by Toún, now stood at a mere two hundred soldiers. Normally, there should have been at least five hundred men, but about two hundred had been taken for the Zer Illias capture force, and about a hundred of those remaining had joined Raswan Bazgan in his recent uprising.

The Fifth Army Corps, which Bouwen should originally have been commanding, had essentially been annihilated during the battle against Garda's army and Greygun's forces in the outskirts of Helio. The last remaining trace of the 'Fifth Army Corps' was the mercenary unit attached to it, currently led by Orba, and which was about fifty men strong.

Less than a hundred of Nidhal's soldiers had escorted Princess Esmena back as her guards, and Natokk had likewise returned from Eimen with about fifty men.

There was also the crew of the cruiser that Esmena had returned in, but this was after a major battle: they did not have sufficient arrangements either for personnel or for ether.

Tsk.

It was very obvious that if Mephius were to march in earnest, forget about repelling them, with their current military strength, they would be hard pressed to even defend against them.

But –

Taúlia's fate depended on it. Bouwen lived in constant shame over the defeat in the battle at Helio and of the disgrace of having afterwards let one of Garda's

lackeys kidnap Esmena. If Ax had given him permission, he would voluntarily have abandoned his position as general.

But now, before him was a fight worthy of a warrior, one in which he could throw his life away proudly.

Since it means death either way.

He hoped to die reclaiming his honour as a warrior, holding fast until the end and defending Taúlia until reinforcements arrived. He would consecrate his death to Ax, who had placed expectations in him, and to the now deceased Archduke Hirgo Tedos, who had adopted him as his son.

It was close to midnight when Bouwen summoned the various commanders. Three company captains under Toún's command, Nidhal, Natokk, and also – although as a foreigner he stood out – the mercenary platoon captain, Orba.. Bouwen briefly explained the situation. As it would only invite needless speculation, he concealed the fact that the messenger who had brought the advance warning was Princess Vileena. The fastest to react to the name 'Mephius' was, both surprisingly and unsurprisingly, Orba.

"Impossible!" He almost leapt to his feet.

That was rare for him, who never expressed any emotion and whose face was hidden behind a mask; it was usually impossible to know what he was thinking. For a second, everyone's eyes turned towards him, and even though he immediately returned to his senses and sat back down, he could not conceal how shaken he was.

Nor was it only Orba; informed of the emergency, the warriors whose faces had been flushed red after the banquet suddenly looked tense. And hatred towards Mephius of course filled the room.

"Curse Mephius, so they can't be trusted after all."

"They must have caught wind of the war with Garda. The alliance was probably a trick to throw us off guard."

"So this is how base you really are, Guhl Mephius!"

But cursing Mephius now would only be a waste of time. They quickly moved onto discussing the real issues at hand. Most of them were of the opinion that they should use what little ether they had left to fly airships requesting reinforcements. But even after sending messengers to their nearest neighbours, Helio and Cherek, help would not arrive for about eight days – even at the very lowest estimate, it would take at least five days.

Can we hold out that long? That thought was written on every one of their faces.

The messengers would of course continue from Helio and Cherek to Eimen, where Ax was.

“It would be good if you report that the enemy numbers over ten thousand.”

The one who said that was a man who had barely opened his mouth until then – Orba.

“Ten thousand?” Bouwen asked.

He did not have detailed information about their numbers, but ten thousand must surely represent the vast majority of the total number of troops that Mephius could mobilise under normal circumstances. But as he was asking the question, he realised the intention behind that ‘ten thousand’.

“You want to give the impression that this isn’t a request for reinforcements for Taúlia but a call to arms to every city to defend the whole of Tauran?”

The masked swordsman gave a slight nod.

It was the same as saying that the threat was not simply against Taúlia, but that Mephius was going to invade the entire western region. And this was also right after all the cities had united to subjugate Garda.

Messengers requesting reinforcements would be sent immediately. What came next was deciding how to defend the city with their remaining troops.

“Should we increase the guards at the border? It would let them see that we’ve made preparations. Since the enemy is planning a surprise attack, once they’ve realised that we know what they’re up to, they won’t be so quick to cross the border.”

"No, we should call back the guards. According to the messenger, the soldiers have already left Apta."

"They've lined up formations on the opposite shore? I still find it hard to believe that they're going to violate the border..."

At that very moment, a messenger came rushing from the border zone. The enemy force had crossed the border. The reason the guards had not sent up a beacon was to hide the fact that they had noticed the invading troops.

Everyone there was feeling increasingly furious.

Naturally, everyone understood that it would be a difficult fight. In a way, the sense of crisis was even greater than when Garda's army had taken Helio and were drawing in on Taúlia. The problem was not only the number of soldiers. Their ruler, Ax Bazgan, was away and the old sage, Ravan Dol, was confined to bed since his injury had been a serious one.

Because of that, the warriors were even fiercer than usual and the blood was rushing to their head. It looked like at any moment now, bullets would start flying right there, and they would grab their swords or guns and go charging out.

They could no longer postpone things by wasting time and words. Having reached that conclusion, Bouwen was going to have the entirety of Taúlia's military take up position and prepare to defend the city.

Slow – Orba muttered in a low voice. The nearby Bouwen lashed out.

"I know," he barked. "We've lost the initiative. That's why we have to hurry and..."

"No," said Orba. His arms were crossed in such a way that it looked as though his nails were digging into his own skin, but he did not seem to have any intention of unfolding them. "It's Mephius who is being slow."

"Captain!"

Dohrai exclaimed in surprise when he saw the unit of guards that he belonged to earlier than he had expected - which was to say-when he saw them near

Taúlia rather than at the border.

They were in the middle of escorting the Princess back. The sun had set, so flying at low-altitude without guidance was difficult. When they stopped at the relay station to replenish their ether, they had taken a three-hour nap. Even after waking up, there had still been no report of a beacon being lit.

The night had already been considerably advanced when Vileena, Dohrai, and the others had touched down there to resupply before covering the final distance to the border only to run into the border guards. About three hours earlier, these guards had seen lights on the River Yunos and had immediately dispatched a messenger to Taúlia – who seemed to have stopped by while Dohrai's group was sleeping and so had missed them – after which, the captain had decided to pull back. Considering how low their numbers were, staying would simply have meant needlessly squandering Taúlia's military manpower.

"Princess," the captain of the border guards turned anxious eyes towards her. Now that the enemy invasion had become a reality, her position had become far more perilous. And it would become even more so if she returned to Mephius.

Vileena, however, shook her slender neck. "I do not think that I will be able to do anything more. But still, I will try my best."

She once again sat astride the airship. Aware of how determined the Princess was, Dohrai and the others acted sensibly and furnished her with a tank of ether from the supply tanks in their ships. With no one to guide from there on, she would need to pick up altitude. And for that, one could never have too much ether.

"Thank you... Well then, see you next time."

With those parting words, Vileena speedily flew off. In no time at all, she had ascended high and was cutting her way through the wind.

Next time – she herself did not believe in it. She had done her best to keep her expression unconcerned for the sake of the Taúlian, but once she was alone, she bit down hard on her lip.

So they crossed the border after all.

She had been expecting it, but now that it had actually happened, even the wind, which should have been lashing at her from the front, seemed to have turned into a heavy weight pressing down on the girl's shoulders.

How could they tear up an agreement so easily?

How could they smash peace as though it were nothing?

As expected, Nabarl was in the lead with three hundred of his soldiers. They had set up camp and lit their fires on top of the hill which had been occupied by the Taúlian border guards until just a short while earlier.

Having noticed the sound of the airship, the sentries had raised the muzzles of their guns. Vileena was unfazed and dropped her altitude when she was right before them, just as she had earlier with the Taúlian border guards. Realising that the pilot was the Garberan princess, the Mephian soldiers all broke out into cries of surprise and confusion.

Their commander-in-chief, Nabarl, stepped forward with an understandably equally surprised appearance. Thinking that there would be enemy guards in this area, he had from the start made an ostentatious show of fording the river and had expected a verbal challenge or warning shots to be fired, so it had come as a surprise to find the border area completely empty.

His unit of course included Pashir, who had been made up to look like Felipe.

Once Vileena had alighted from the airship, her long hair swaying, Nabarl started interrogating her like he wanted to rip her apart.

"Princess, would you care to tell me why you are here, across the border?"

"I also have the same question to make."

"Princess."

"I have just been to Taúlia."

Although the Princess' complexion was a little pale, she stood up straight and faced Nabarl.

"What, Taúlia?"

Unease flitted across Nabarl's face. Vileena nodded.

“Is there something strange about that? The relationship with Taúlia is one of sworn future friendship. The Princess of Taúlia, Lady Esmena, was received at Apta. This time, as the daughter of the king of Garbera and as the fiancée to His Highness Gil, the crown prince of Mephius, I was the one to visit them.”

“ ... ”

“Ah yes, by the way...” Vileena deliberately paused as she was speaking. That way of doing things resembled her fiancé. “Just before leaving for Taúlia, I observed a military unit departing through Apta’s north gate. I thought it strange since these are not times of war, but being a woman, it is not something I would understand. When I talked about it with the people in Taúlia, everyone greatly wondered at it. Oh but right after that, for some reason everyone seemed to become very busy. The gentlemen especially seemed to be hurrying to prepare guns and armour.”

“Princess!”

A commotion ran through the soldiers while Nabarl was left temporarily open-mouthed. His thoughts could not catch up with reality.

This commander-in-chief – This commander-in-chief – a new thought struck Vileena as she observed his expression – she might be able to sway him depending on his mental state.

Meanwhile, Nabarl had finally grasped that this girl had betrayed information of the surprise attack to Taúlia.

“Princess. I do not know what you are playing at, but this is an act of treachery towards Mephius.”

“Playing? I merely went to Taúlia. Did I not say so? If it comes to that, what are you gentlemen planning? Surely you are not taking guns and swords to go sightseeing in Taúlia?”

“It’s a shame, Princess, but we don’t have time to waste playing word games with you,” Nabarl barked, visibly irritated.

Vileena frowned slightly at his rudeness, “even if you continue to drag your cannons to go and ‘play’ in Taúlia, those on the Taúlian side already know and will be preparing their swords and guns to ‘play’ with you. Your strategy was no

doubt to suddenly go and 'play' without prior declaration, but that plan has already failed. Fortunately, there has not yet been any exchange of gunfire. I am willing to return, once more, to Taúlia and apologise for your ill-manners which have induced this misunderstanding."

Nabarl's face was thunderous but he remained silent. Convinced of her victory, Vileena clapped her hands together. It was a strangely discordant sound on that almost barren hilltop.

"Right, it will soon be dawn. If you tarry too much in returning home, the families of the soldiers will get worried, won't they? It would be wise to move back for now. I am sure that Taúlia will welcome you if you come to 'play' another day, bringing a visiting gift rather than weapons and..."

"Ha ha," Nabarl snorted with contemptuous laughter, cutting through the girl's words. "Are you imitating Prince Gil? He also seems to have liked putting himself forward, pretending to be a hero."

"What?"

"You might be royalty, but you're very young. You seem to think that you're some sort of envoy of justice, but what happens if I decide not to step back?"

"What is it you are trying to say?"

Nabarl rudely stepped up and shoved his face near hers.

"Because you betrayed information, more soldiers than expected will die on Mephius' side. Which is the same as saying that you killed them, Princess."

Vileena's face was even paler than before. She clenched her trembling fists.

"Absurd. If you know that there will be casualties, then that gives you all the more reason to turn back. What justification does this war have?"

There was no more playing with words.

"So," Nabarl suddenly stooped, bringing his gaze level with Vileena's, "this conversation is over, Princess. I guess what I'm saying, in a roundabout way, is that you are stupid."

Vileena said nothing. This time, it was the Princess' thoughts that were having trouble catching up to the reality of so much disdain. Nabarl barred his teeth

and laughed.

“Hand over information.. befriend our enemies... do whatever you like. I’m sure you don’t know this, but Taúlia doesn’t currently have the military strength to stop us. In other words, what you did was completely pointless. Do you understand why I said that you’re stupid?”

Nabarl then continued in a voice too low for the soldiers to hear.

“I see... Was it at your instigation that that *foolish* prince seemed to change? He was stupid too. Seduced, by an empty-headed woman, he took himself for a hero and died.”

This time, Vileena’s face flushed crimson.

The sound of slap rang out as her palm struck Nabarl’s cheek. Hidden from the soldiers view, at that moment, Nabarl’s hand had brushed Vileena’s breasts.

Nabarl stroked his cheek with a smirk.

Her face still flushed in anger and humiliation, Vileena quickly turned her back to him and rushed back to the airship.

Nabarl sneered, “What do you intend to do, Princess? Are you going back to your country to cling to your father in tears?”

“I’m going back to Taúlia.”

“Oh?”

Straddling the airship, Vileena glared sharply at the Mephian soldier.

“If you bomb or charge at Taúlia knowing that I am there, it will be the same as turning your sword against Garbera. Mephius will then unilaterally have broken its alliance not only with Taúlia, but also with Garbera. It will not be able to escape censure for baseness.”

“Ooh. Protecting your dignity by dying with the people of Taúlia?” Nabarl still jeered.

I’ll show you even if it means dying – Vileena wanted to retort, but it just felt too childish, so she kept her rosy lips shut in a straight line.

Nabarl, commander of the Blue Zenith Division, watched the airship once

again soar into the sky.

“Take up formation. That little girl has spared us the trouble of lighting a beacon. Taúlia’s first wave of troops is coming!”

He seemed rather joyous and his paunch juggled as he laughed.

Part 3

Lights were moving in the dead of night.

They flew by so fast that they almost seemed like nothing more than a hallucination, but the darkness that followed was filled by galloping cavalry and dragoon units. The only ones carrying torches were Orba, who was riding in the lead, and the soldiers who were handling the dragons that were pulling the cannons.

His iron mask warmed in the flames, Orba silently galloped on.

Mephius is invading. – When Bouwen had said that, Orba had not been able to draw a clear ‘picture’ of it in his head. And that despite the fact he usually had good insight.

Mephius was, of course, his native land. It was a little different from not being able to believe it. For he, who had spent several months as the crown prince, had at some point subconsciously started to feel that a part of ‘Mephius’ belonged to him. It was a strange impression, as though he were in a corridor and, despite there being no mirror at the end, there was someone who looked exactly like him, who then drew their sword and charged to attack.

However, when he had heard the details from Bouwen, the ‘Mephius’ that was embodied by the figure of the Crown Prince – or in other words, by Orba himself – had vanished like smoke, and gradually a different figure had formed.

Guhl Mephius.

Orba could see those eyes, filled with suspicion and lust for power, and those lips that were twisted into a vicious smile. At the same time, what had once been Orba’s image of a statesman and a man in authority superimposed itself on top of that until it almost entirely filled his field of vision: Oubary Bilan, smiling on horseback as the village burned and the villagers, whom Orba knew, had their heads sliced off by gleaming swords and spears.

In the middle of the council of war and behind his mask, hatred had made his temples throb, and he had ground his teeth and clenched his arms crossed so strongly that their muscles bulged and that he himself would have trouble uncrossing them.

Orba did not wonder – *why attack the west now*. Rulers such as Guhl Mephius constantly burned with the ambition for supremacy. He had probably been told of the military campaign against Garda by the spies he had sent west, and had judged that now was a good opportunity.

The troops which had been observed to have left Apta had crossed the River Yunos and had set up camp on the Gajira plains. Therefore, it seemed that they either intended to wait for troops following behind them, or they were not yet clear on how to move next.

After the council of war, Orba was given a hundred regular soldiers on top of the fifty or so from his mercenary unit, as well as two cannons. Originally, he would have preferred a few more guns, but Mephius could be intending to use its troops to attract their attention before appearing from above in ships. The city's air force could not be increased, so most of the cannons currently in Taúlia had to remain in position around the it.

There was one cruiser currently in Taúlia. This ship, which had brought Esmena back from Eimen, would for now be the central pillar of their defence. If the point came when they decided that they had no other choice, they planned to use it to allow Esmena and the queen to escape.

In exchange for not being able to give him as many cannons as he would have hoped for, most of the soldiers he received were riflemen. Bouwen Tedos had responded as best as he could to Orba's request.

"Orba is Mephian." During the council of war, Bouwen had deliberately brought up what should have been best left unsaid, no doubt also as a way of showing consideration to the surroundings. "He knows more about the enemy than we do. There's no objection to entrusting soldiers to the hero who killed Garda, *right?*"

The commanders did not say a word.

What the situation required more than anything was a swift response. The more time passed, the more the enemy numbers would increase and the more the difference between them would widen. Forget the fact that reinforcements would take about a week to arrive, they were afraid that if they made a single mistake, Taúlia would be engulfed in flames this very night. Although no one said it, the atmosphere inside the room seemed to throb.

The fighting was finally over. That's what people thought, not only in Taúlia but everywhere in the west. In this land, where swords had once constantly been soaked in blood and where at any given time a stone city was surely ablaze, everyone now shared that one belief. And yet now, the castle belonging to Ax Bazgan, the leader of the western union which had defeated Garda, was on the verge of falling at the hands of its base and treacherous neighbour.

With that, they had deftly avoided a pointless fight among comrades on the same side.

After the council of war had finished, Orba summoned everyone from his unit. That of course included Shique and Gilliam as well as Talcott and Stan.

“We’re going to be attacking the Mephian forces which have invaded Taúlian territory.”

That curt announcement astounded everyone in the unit.

He dispassionately explained what tactics they would be using and then, still with the same lack of emotion, he finished outfitting himself.

“Orba.”

Shique looked like he had something he wanted to say but Orba responded by making the first move.

“There’s no time to rest, huh?”

“Ah... Yeah.”

“If we manage to push Mephius back, I should give the men a holiday. Neither Bouwen nor Ax would say no.”

“That’s for sure,” Shique interjected. “What will you do on your holiday?”

“Me?”

Orba stayed silent for a moment as he sheathed his blade in leather.

“Right,” he opened his mouth to speak, “I could swim the Yunos. I was always playing about in the river when I was little, so I’m confident in my swimming. I could go and show off to those guys in Apta.” *No* – smiling unintentionally, Shique used that smile to show his agreement with Orba, but inwardly, he was thinking something else.

When you have the time, you read books – while jotting things down with a sullen face in that terrible handwriting of yours – and if you’re not doing that, your training with a sword... or a horse... or a dragon.

It’s like you can’t live fast enough. I don’t know anyone else who’s as bad as you at taking it easy.

“Are they coming?”

Having established their position in the Gajira Plains, Nabarl gave a huge smile when he caught sight of the line of torches drawing closer to them.

“Probably a reconnaissance team. How many?”

“There aren’t that many lights. It looks like trying to trick us but... it should be less than two hundred.”

Hearing that answer from the soldier who was looking through a telescope, Nabarl’s smile grew wider and wider. After all, the soldiers from his Blue Zenith Division as well as the guards from Apta were likewise a mere two hundred apiece. While that was twice as many as the enemy numbers, this was the enemy’s territory. Besides which, the surroundings were still wrapped in darkness. They would have to wait to engulf the enemy like an inferno.

Although actually, the Mephian soldiers in the encampment were not the first to have crossed the River Yunos. He had previously sent soldiers out along the route which the enemy was now marching on. When those scouts had pulled back, he had received a rapid succession of reports from them. Nabarl heard them while stroking his cheek.

“Right – we’ll install one of the guns on higher ground. César!”

He summoned the vice-captain of his main troops. Incidentally, the former

Imperial Guard Pashir had placed under this César's command.

For the next half-hour, he fired off instructions to his men, César included. The enemy had started to line up along the ridge of the Gajira plains. They had been fast so most of them must be mounted soldiers. And then, no doubt to stall for time, a single messenger rode up, a torch in one hand.

Held in check by the Mephian riflemen, the messenger called out so that Nabarl could hear him from within the camp.

"You all from Mephius, what kind of situation is this? You are treading into our territory. We received neither prior notification nor declaration. We ask that you turn back at once. If you do not, even though we are linked by a peace agreement, we will not leave things as they are either."

Fire! – Nabarl desperately repressed the urge to give that merciless order. If they fired, the enemy guns would commence bombardment. On the grounds that the battle had not yet started, and also with the intention of delaying things, Nabarl forbade that any threatening actions be made against the messenger and simply allowed him to shout.

Probably coming to the conclusion that things could not be settled, the messenger returned to his own side.

For a while, there were neither gunshots nor raised voices as the face-off continued into the night. From the enemy's point of view, wasting time was not a bad trick. Since Mephius had been intending a surprise attack, they might be hoping that once morning came, they would be compelled to turn back having used up all of their resources.

The sky was finally starting to turn light.

The darkness had served as the slender thread that maintained the balance between both sides, and at the same time that it was dispelled, movement appeared. The soldier who had been monitoring the ridgeline suddenly raised a flag and sent Nabarl a signal. Nabarl stared hard in the same direction then –

"Fire!" This time, he gave the order.

The guns in the camp roared.

Although, as mentioned, the sky was starting to grow clear, the bombardment had to be done without their having a proper grasp of the enemy's position. Although they did not receive any substantial damage, the Taúlian side became strangely agitated.

Not because of the gunfire.

But because flames could be seen rising up further west, beyond the ridgeline – from Taúlia's direction.

Chapter 7: The Guardians of the West

Part 1

It's was roughly an hour before Nabarl was to give the order to fire.

To the northwest of Apta lay the Belgana Summits, which, along with the River Yunos, formed the border. Incidentally, 'Summits' was the name used on the western side, while in Mephius, they were called the 'Belgana Mountains'. Because a part of the mountain summits looked completely flat when seen from Helio, people in the west referred to that section as the 'Belgana Summit' and often cited it when making a comparison to something flat, until it gradually became to be the name used for the mountains as a whole.

The noise of rattling armour was clanging within those Belgana mountains. The surroundings were dark but the soldiers, their guns and swords at the ready, had had the way thoroughly identified by the platoon sent beforehand. They chatted together as they went down the mountain.

Originally, there had been a fortress that Helio had built to keep an eye on the east, but said fortress had been burned down during the battles surrounding that same Helio. Since, on top of that, all of Tauran had then been plunged into war, the Belganas had truly become completely deserted.

It's just as His Majesty said.

The armour-clad warrior in the front repeatedly nodded in admiration. He was Darren, vice-commander of the Blue Zenith Division and a former mercenary captain.

So his exalted gaze penetrates as far as the west?

It was said that spies frequently stole in and collected information, besides the absence of any signs of life in the Belgas, what confirmed that even more was the fact that they had provided a scrupulous survey of the terrain. It was as if, without stirring from Mephius, the Emperor was able to see through every move the west makes.

“A terrifying personage.”

“What’s that, vice-commander?”

“Nothing. I was just saying that if we’re not careful, we might get our asses bitten by mountain wolves.”

Darren had not gotten used to being called ‘vice-commander’ and felt happy every time he heard it. His heart felt light in a way that was separate from the elation he felt before a battle.

Anyway, just as the Emperor had said, there were very few soldiers in Taúlia. Even if they simply applied brute force, there was no doubt that it would fall within two or three days. But regardless of that, their commander-in-chief, Nabarl, had planned for a more certain and complete victory.

He had devised a strategy that would allow them to seize Taúlia extremely quickly by attacking from the front, and accomplish that without borrowing help from Rogue and Odyne, the two generals who had opposed the Emperor. Even without having been threatened by Odyne, Nabarl had felt from the start that – *speed will be crucial to this battle*.

Nabarl had started by entrusting Darren with five hundred soldiers and had them leave from Apta. To prevent the enemy from suspecting this manoeuvre, Nabarl himself had then led four hundred across the Yunos and had deliberately let them be sighted. During that time, Darren’s troops had headed north and, using an air carrier that had been concealed in the forest beforehand, they had crossed the river at low altitude in a position from where the Taúlians could not see them.

After the carrier had finished ferrying all of the soldiers across the river, it had returned to Apta. The Blue Zenith Division had from the start been provided with little in the way of ships. Therefore, they had not been aiming to make direct use of it during the attack and had instead let it be seen making its way

back to Apta, all for the purpose of flaunting the Mephian side's movements.

Concealed within the Belgas, Darren's unit would start descending from the mountains at a time that they had pre-arranged with the General.

While Nabarl's main force was drawing the attention of the enemy forces, Darren's detached unit would launch a direct assault on Taúlia.

When the enemy forces saw the flames rising from the city, they would have no choice but to pull back. Nabarl's troops would then press forward and whittle them away to join with Darren's unit in the direct attack on Taúlia – such was the plan.

It's a stratagem that further widens the difference in manpower between the enemy and us – Darren was in high spirits.

There was no possibility of defeat.

When Darren descended the path, a platoon, which had been sent on ahead and was already at the foot of the mountain, could be found making its preparations. There were also men sitting on the roots of the sparsely growing trees, busy assembling dismantled cannons. While he walked around among them, clapping the soldiers on the shoulder, his heart was beating with excitement.

The first to reach Taúlia will be me, Darren.

He had served Nabarl Metti's family for a long while and had stood on the battlefield innumerable times during the ten-year war with Garbera, but he had not earned any distinguished military accomplishments. Darren was currently thirty-nine. Now that this amazing opportunity had come around, he did not plan on letting it slip by, even if he had to seize it with his teeth.

"Tomorrow, we'll be drinking in Taúlia. And I'm not the kind of officer to nag and criticise... I'm sure you get what I'm saying."

He deliberately gave a vulgar smile to fan their morale. He would let them plunder Taúlia and its women before the Mephian main force arrived behind them.

The preparations were set and he led the five hundred soldiers as they started

their march along the downward-sloping path.

Kill.

Plunder.

Rape.

A silent fervour was blowing among the soldiers and, at the centre, a brilliant future was dazzlingly unfolding within Darren's mind.

Then right before him, something blinked white and red.

As though to prove that it had not been his imagination, the rattle of continuous gunfire sounded in Darren's ears.

The enemy's formation was, as expected, thrown into turmoil. It looked like they were anxious to hurry back towards Taúlia, from which the flames were rising.

"Advance!"

When Nabarl fired off the order, dragoons riding Tengo dragons rushed out in the lead. Cavalrymen and pikemen followed behind. They galloped along the ridge. Nabarl himself kicked his horse's flank, intent on flying further and further forward.

The group in the lead steadily drew up behind the disorganised enemy line. In no time at all, they were in a position to be able to tear into them.

At that moment, gunshots rang out.

Taúlian riflemen lying hidden on either side of the path had opened fire. It was an ambush which had no doubt been prepared beforehand. If the Mephian forces had approached as one group it would have been an effective move but, at that moment, their forces were divided in two. Nabarl's main force and the detached unit led by César.

No more than a few dozen soldiers were shot. Nabarl raised his hand and the cannon, which he had ordered installed earlier on higher ground, spewed fire. The cannonballs flew above the heads of the Mephian soldiers, then exploded

with a roar.

The gunshots stopped.

Before the smoke from the impact had even cleared, Nabarl gave the signal to advance again. The horses pressed forward, César's unit from the front while Nabarl's troops descended the slope along a different route, a little further to the south.

At that, the Mephian riflemen who were following behind plugged the gap between the two units by dropping on one knee and lining up in rows. This time, it was their guns which fired simultaneously. Unable to counterattack and no longer able to retreat, the Taúlian riflemen lying in ambush on either side of the road were in utter chaos when they were run through by the spears of César's unit.

Nabarl's strategy had triumphed.

He had speculated that if Taúlia judged that things had developed into a full-war, they would try to draw the enemy to their own position. Since the Taúlian side very obviously had the geographic advantage, they would no doubt pretend to pull back and lay riflemen in ambush along their path of retreat. And of course, those soldiers would serve as cover in a situation in which they really did have to pull back – such as when flames were rising from Taúlia.

Therefore, when pretending to advance, Nabarl had temporarily split his unit in two. When the enemy opened fire, revealing the positions of the ambushing troops, he would give the order to the cannon at the rear to commence bombardment.

The scheme had worked perfectly.

Nabarl had never commanded a large army, but he had taken part in many campaigns. In terms of experience, he far exceeded Zaat Quark, the general who had originally commanded the 'Blue Archery Division' as one of the twelve generals.

There was no longer any doubt that victory would be theirs. Sitting on horseback, Nabarl's face relaxed. He, who had only just been made part of the twelve generals, would accomplish the feat of seizing Taúlia, and without

borrowing any help from Rogue or Odyne.

He arrived at the bottom of the slope and onto the level path, joining up with César's unit just a little behind and to the left of them. Nabarl could see the fleeing enemy soldiers, their backs lit up by a hazy line of fire. The dragoons who were galloping in the lead of César's troops already had their spears raised.

"Don't be in such a hurry to achieve your feats," Nabarl called out with a smile, raising his hand which was encased in a gauntlet. "As long as we enter the gates of Taúlia, everyone from the Metti group will be Mephian heroes and..."

His shout was drowned out in a strong wind.

He wondered whether something had come flying from the front when whatever-it-was suddenly made an abrupt turn just before slamming into the dragon-mounted warriors, moving so quickly that it almost left an afterimage.

Nabarl saw an airship.

Startled because of it, the dragon-mounted warriors bucked and fell. The dragons and horses following behind were also struck by that gust of wind and, for a moment, their advance faltered. Nabarl's unit, which was galloping at their flank, seemed about to overtake them.

"Act sharp!"

Several riders fired but the airship was already above the Taúlian soldiers and was rapidly getting away. Even in the dark, they could make out that the passenger had long, shimmering hair.

It can't be.

Nabarl thought for an instant, but –

No, impossible. A little girl trampling into a man's battlefield?

A sinister emotion filled his chest. When he caught that princess in Taúlia, he would bind her hands, press a slave brand into her flesh, and send her back to Garbera. No matter what kind of blow she tried to throw at him, Nabarl's victory would remain unshaken.

César's unit had faltered for a moment, but they once more got into

formation and lined their horses up next to those with Nabarl.

The backs of the enemy soldiers were once again close at hand.

This time –

Nabarl was about to grasp his spear in his hand.

When the wind blew again.

A strong wind from the north. Or no, rather than a wind, it was better to call it a pressure. Nabarl sensed bloodlust and hostility so fierce they were almost stabbing him in the face and which quickly transformed into an armed group brandishing lights in the dark.

“What!”

Their blades drawn, the group of riders immediately attacked by charging at César’s flank.

The wind swallowed their allies’ panic and surprise and the surroundings were immediately filled with ferocious roars and the solemn echo of steel.

“T-This is...” Nabarl unconsciously groaned on horseback.

A two-stage ambush? He wondered for a second. However, the numerically weak Taúlia usually lined its soldiers up along the border to keep an eye on Mephius, so it should have felt the need to flaunt its full numbers at a time like this. Moreover, with the city being attacked, they should have been rushing back to it rather than carrying out an ambush.

It was unthinkable that the enemy, who should have been stunned by the attack from behind on what was effectively their headquarters, should be displaying such well-coordinated actions. Yet the ones currently in the height of chaos and confusion were Nabarl’s forces.

The wind blew furiously and scattered the spearhead of César’s unit as though it had been made of sand.

“Bastards!”

Nabarl came to a prompt decision. As soon as he caught sight of César, also on horseback, he yelled –

“Stop them here. Hold fast to the end. We’ll chase the enemy.”

The currently-fleeing Taúlian troops probably intended to turn back and catch them in a pincer movement. In which case, Nabarl’s forces would be annihilated. They intended to crush every one of them. His face pale, César nodded.

Sparks went flying at his side. Among the ambushing troops, one slimly-built and conspicuously fast soldier was cleaving through César’s unit. The fires that had spread out in the wake of the bombardment cast an iron glow on the enemy soldier’s face.

He was wearing a mask.

César spurred his own horse forward to intercept the enemy forces.

“Hold, hold! Cover General Nabarl’s assault! And as for you – die!”

With a backwards glance at his vice-captain who was brandishing his spear overhead, Nabarl urged his own men on. “Go, go!” He once more propelled his horse forward.

Part 2

Mephius' movements are slow.

The reason why Orba had felt that way during the council of war was because of the difference between the information that the messenger had brought and the Mephian side's actual movements.

The messenger had confirmed that they had seen troops leave by Apta's north gate with their own eyes. Going north no doubt meant that they had chosen a route that circumvented the River Yunos. Yet now, several hours later, the enemy had directly crossed the Yunos.

A detached force.

Looking at the map that was spread open on the table, Orba had a hunch.

"Here," Orba pointed to a spot in the Belgana Summits. "Helio should have a fortress. But I burnt it down. Is there any defence line there currently?"

"Ridiculous," realising what Orba was going to say, a crease appeared between Bouwen's brows. "The Belganas are a natural stronghold for Taúlia. Soldiers can't move around them without knowing the terrain, especially at night."

"What if Mephius has investigated that terrain? You should take into account that while we were fighting Garda, the Belganas were as good as deserted."

Guhl – Orba cursed inwardly. It was as though Garda's rampage had been setting the scene for Guhl's invasion of the west.

"The soldiers at the border are meant to lure us. The troops which left Apta first are definitely intending to attack Taúlia via a different route."

The various commanders looked towards Orba then Bouwen in turn. Bouwen's mouth was pursed shut as he looked down at the map.

“General Bouwen,” Orba’s tone urged to make a decision, “you should leave some soldiers with someone trustworthy and have them stage an ambush in the Belgas. Someone from the area will know where a large number of soldiers are most likely to be able to pass. We’ll aim our guns and cannons at where the enemy will assemble.”

Orba pressed his finger against the map and moved from one point to another.

“We’ll send some soldiers to the border and deliberately let the enemy believe that their strategy has worked. Once the Belgas have been cleaned out, the unit there will hurry to the border. Just before they arrive, the fire —”

“Fire?”

“We’ll light a large bonfire in the outskirts of Taúlia. To make it look like the assault unit has really fired its cannons at the city. But it’s the enemy who’ll be lured in.”

Bouwen’s eyes shifted from the map to Orba.

Not to belabour the point, but they had very little time. He looked each of the commanders in the face as though to quell any murmurs of dissatisfaction before they arose, then...

“Right, we’ll do that,” he decided. Then continued, “Orba, I’ll leave soldiers with you.”

“With me?”

“With that said, we can only add about a hundred other troops to your own mercenary unit. Will that work?”

“It’ll need greater numbers than that to lure the enemies at the border.”

“No, you’ll head for the Belgas. I’ll go to the border.”

“General!”

The commanders were understandably shaken. It was probably an even fifty-fifty as to whether the border or the Belgas was the most dangerous but – if Orba’s analysis was correct – failure in the Belgas was the one most directly tied to the possible fall of Taúlia. And that vital task was being left to Orba – a

foreigner and a mere mercenary.

“Show me the skill of the swordsman who reaped Garda’s head.”

When Bouwen smiled wryly after giving that order, Orba seemed to remember what his position was.

“Aye,” he finally stood to attention.

Orba’s unit set up an ambush in the Belgana Summits and when Darren’s troops came into sight, he ordered the hundred riflemen lent him by Bouwen to open fire. Simultaneously, he had the cannons aim fire at the enemy’s rear.

A rain of bullets at the front, a series of explosions at the back. On top of that, several trees caught fire and fell. How could Darren’s group not waver and try to flee?

“Attack.”

Orba was the first to rush towards the collapsing enemy group.

Swords swung down, spears were thrust out. Throwing himself into that storm, he attacked, sharp and fast, while the flames from the burning trees bathed the enemy soldiers in its light.

Orba’s longsword gleamed as it raised the howl of death. He cut down one, then flew to the left and cleaved the top of another’s head through their helmet, guarded against an enemy hammer then decapitated its owner.

The enemy – in other words, Mephians. But Orba did not think of that. Mephius was no longer a part of him, it was a name that was synonymous with Emperor Guhl’s spectre.

The mercenaries also fought boldly, their rough voices resounding. They were the unit which had been acclaimed throughout the west for defeating Garda; that in itself gave them confidence. It went without saying for Shique or Gilliam, but even the Helian soldier Kurún, who had turned pale during the battle at the Coldrin Hills, was now so warrior-like that he was barely recognisable.

Once they had annihilated Darren’s unit, their armour wet with blood, they immediately jumped on horseback. Their horses travelled along the outer walls

of the city-state and once they had reached the end of those walls and the Gajira plains lay before them, they gave the signal for fire to rise within Taúlia.

The heaps of grass and straw piled up in the outskirts of the city were set alight.

However, because there had been so little time to prepare, they had not been able to gather sufficient quantities of kindling. Bouwen had consulted with Toún Bazgan, the general who had long shouldered the responsibility for defending Taúlia, and had decided on a bold course of action. The townspeople in one area of the city would be evacuated and they would fire their own cannons at the buildings there.

Smoke and flames erupted.

Nabarl took it that Taúlia had successfully been captured. When the soldiers led by Bouwen started to retreat according to plan, he was lured into chasing after them, as expected.

When Nabarl's troops moved forward, Orba's unit, which was on standby to one side of the ridge, started to charge towards their flank.

Up until there, everything was according to prediction.

However...

He divided his troops.

Through the mask, Orba's eyes remained calm and cool to the end. It was clear from the way he had fired a canon to mow down their riflemen that the opponent was skilled in warfare. Since the riflemen were not able to stall them, Orba's unit would be late reaching the enemy, which would soon be in striking distance of Bouwen's rear. If that happened, they would lose the timing for Bouwen's troops to do an about-face and the coming mêlée would devolve into chaos.

The only reason that they narrowly avoided that was –

That airship.

Just as the enemy had been catching up to them, a ship had come flying from the direction Bouwen's troops were running in. Orba could only see it from a

distance, but its movements had been extremely dynamic. If the alignment of the ether jet emission had been off by even a fraction, the airship would instantly have come crashing down. The nerve and skill required were equal to those needed for riding a wild horse with neither saddle nor bridle.

Taúlians are valiant.

Orba once again spurred his horse into the hell-like storm. Each time his sword hummed, blood spurted on either side of him.

He could see that further away, the enemy was still pursuing Bouwen's troops.

The enemy was of course desperate. Perhaps they considered that, since flames were rising from the direction of Taúlia, their strategy had still been successful.

Here.

Swinging his sword before him, Orba had decided on a path to forcibly break through the enemy. The enemy of either side and their ranks devolved into even greater chaos.

In that time, he lunged at an enemy soldier. By sheer coincidence, it was César, the vice-captain of Nabarl's unit. César staggered at the blow to his armour before a sword pierced right through the middle of his forehead. His helmet split and with blood gushing from his head, César fell from his horse. Orba was about to trample over his body.

Then just before he did so.

The gleam of steel before him turned into a flash.

Beneath the still shadowy sky, the darkness itself seemed to have absorbed killing intent before leaping out. Orba twisted his body and was just able to repel the attacking sword.

This guy.

Chills shivered up his spine. If his movements had been a fraction slower, Orba's head would unquestionably have been separated from his body.

Die.

He felt chills, yet at the same time, he felt as though the fires of hell were burning in his chest and burning hot blood was coursing to every part of his limbs.

Strong.

With lightning speed, the sword lunged out again and he parried it a second, then a third time. As he did so, he shifted the position of his feet and managed to find one in which both his feet were firmly on the ground.

The enemy soldier's bulky body loomed closer, a mass of killing intent. Orba took a firm step on the solid ground and repelled his opponent's thrust, then the next second counterattacked by swinging his sword down diagonally.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Sparks flew three times.

Orba's counterattack, the enemy's blow, and then another strike from Orba – each was parried in mid-air by the other's sword.

On the third time their swords clashed and locked together, they found themselves face-to-face, the swords between them.

At that moment, Orba gasped in surprise.

The enemy wore no helmet... And it was dawn. In the pale light that makes the world look as though it had sunk underwater, he was able to see his opponent's face up close.

"Pashir!"

The name spontaneously burst from his lips.

Hearing his shout, the strength with which his opponent was pressing down on his sword lightened. Both of them leapt backwards at almost exactly the same time and, their stances at the ready, stared fixedly at the other.

He –

Was certainly Pashir. It was not just his appearance, Orba remembered this

strong numbness in his arms, just as with their previous fight. Apart from Garbera's general Ryucown, Orba knew no other master swordsman this strong.

Perhaps Pashir also remembered his swordsmanship as he glared sharply at Orba's mask – a mask in a different shape from the one he had worn in Mephius.

"It can't be," he moved his mouth, "you're – Orba?"

"Yeah."

Even as he was answering, Orba was thinking – *shit!*

This is what it meant to fight Mephius. He might have to turn his sword against former acquaintances. Perhaps among those here were Gowen or every one of the Imperial Guards who had been under Orba's command. If Orba attached a name to every opponent here, he would no longer be able to wield his sword against them.



All around them, the clash of weapons and the wail of death cries rose and fell. As though they were in a different world, only between their two swords had silence fallen.

It was then that the shadow of a spear lunged for Orba's side. Orba was actually rather glad of the sudden attack. Because it meant that he had no leeway to ponder about whether his assailant was someone he knew or not. Orba shifted his weight to the back of his feet and bent his body, striking in a side sweep at the enemy's blind spot.

There was no time for Pashir to stop either. Smashing a soldier in the temple and leaping over the body as it pitched forward, he once again closed the distance with Orba.

Their swords collided once more.

"Why are you here?" Pashir almost growled. "You can't really be a spy for Taúlia?"

Tsk.

Orba was finally only just recovering from his shock at meeting someone he knew. At this moment, when they needed to chase after the enemy's main force as quickly as possible, an opponent like Pashir was too much extra trouble. Orba had won against him during Mephius' gladiatorial tournament, but only through a desperate gamble that had ignored whatever came next. He still had things he needed to do after this and he would not be able to win uninjured in a one-on-one fight against Pashir.

Pashir's body was emitting endless pressure.

"There's a load of things I want to ask you."

"Sorry but I'm running out of time."

"What?"

Pashir had momentarily lowered his sword but in an instant, he again nimbly pressed forward. Orba had been going to strike him crossways from the flank, but Pashir prevented him from doing so with movements as agile as a beast.

No, he really is a beast.

He had the impression that he was facing a wild animal.

"What about the other Imperial Guards?"

Orba turned out to be the one asking questions. Sparks flew in all directions as the tip of one sword parried the other.

"Most were split up. But one part is being held in Apta."

"Oh. Then what about you?"

"What?"

"Why are you... no... why is Mephius' army here? You know that Prince Gil chose friendship with the west, right?"

"As to that, ask the Emperor. More importantly, if you're here, does that mean the Prince is still alive? Don't tell me this is another one of Gil's tricks? Or no, is it that you yourself..."

"Who's the commander-in-chief?"

Orba was gambling again. The stakes were every bit as high as during the gladiatorial tournament, but there was a huge difference in his movements. He once again leapt back and freed his sword which he languidly swung in his right hand. Pashir had intended to go after him, but now unease flitted across his face. Staring at him through the mask, Orba asked again –

"Who is it?"

"...Seems like he's newly appointed to the twelve generals. A man called Nabarl Metti."

"Nabarl."

Never heard of him – he thought.

"Pashir, from here on I'm going to be blocking Nabarl. You retreat along with him."

He handed down this pronouncement as though it were completely normal for him to do so, and gave his order as though it were perfectly natural.

Pashir was too speechless to answer. But as Orba turned on his heel, the tip of Pashir's sword was shaking violently.

"Y-You..."

"I," Orba spoke over his shoulder, "am currently a mercenary in Taúlia. But I'm also part of Mephius. I don't believe there's any contradiction there."

"That's ridiculous. With Mephius as it is now, that's..."

"Mephius, as it is *now*, right?"

Orba's own horse had run off somewhere, but a horse whose Taúlian rider had died with a sword through his back was trotting about nearby. He seized the bridle and lowered the soldier's body to the ground. Pashir still had not moved by the time Orba had nimbly swung himself onto the horse's back.

"Shique! Gilliam! You here?" He roared as he urged the horse towards the mêlée.

As former gladiators, as expected, his acquaintances were overwhelming their opponents while remaining themselves largely uninjured. Apart from anything else, the unit had lost César, its commanding officer, so there were many on the Mephiian side who were deserting despite General Nabarl telling them to hold it or die trying, and who were fleeing as fast as they could.

"You two, come with me. We're going to attack the enemy's main force from behind. We'll smash them in half!"

"You're talking nonsense," towering above friend and foe alike, Gilliam hefted his bloodstained axe onto his shoulder.

"Same as always," Shique responded cheerfully as he shook the gore from the swords he held in each hand.

It was only when the three of them had plunged into the distance in a cloud of dust that Pashir belatedly followed after them.

Part 3

Nabarl watched as Bouwen's rear troops broke away in one go. They had been running in an orderly manner when several dozen soldiers deliberately halted and a few dragoons riding Tengo turned back to the rear. They were evidently intending to face death and stall them.

The spirit of Taúlian warriors?

Bending forward on horseback, Nabarl shouted, "Don't slow down. Fly forward!" even while, as a soldier, he felt a little envious of the opponents' coordination.

They used almost no airships in warfare, their guns were almost all old-type ones and Nabarl looked down on the Tauran region's troop formations as being decidedly old-fashioned. Yet even so, they had since long ago surpassed Mephian warriors in the more traditional hand-to-hand combat, in part no doubt because they had been struggling among themselves for so long.

And accordingly, the Taúlian soldiers made a magnificent display of their fighting prowess.

They lunged forward with their spears even as their bodies were being hit, they dragged Mephian soldiers from their horses one after another; and even when their spears or their axes broke, they clung to the horses' necks, giving their lives to slow them down. Nabarl himself killed two, then three soldiers with his spear; but when he jabbed it into that third one's chest, his opponent tightly grasped the spear and pulled him forward by plunging it deeper into his own body. Almost falling from his horse, Nabarl let go of the spear and instead unsheathed his sword and used it to decapitate the soldier. The head which tumbled to the ground was sent flying by a horse that came galloping up from the rear.

Orba, Shique, Gilliam, and about fifty mercenaries following behind them,

were bent over their horses' necks, their swords swinging left and right.

"You don't need to defeat them. Break through!"

With his left hand, he whipped the sweating Taúlia-bred horse, with his right, he swung his sword; and he charged. The Mephian troops were, of course, unprepared for this, and they were divided in half from the rear without being able to turn around to fight back.

"B-Bastard!"

Nabarl was about to thrust his sword at the iron-masked soldier who raced by him, but faster than he could see, it was parried and flung back.

Seeing an opportunity, now that the Mephian forces had fallen into chaos; Bouwen, riding at the front, gave the signal to "Turn around". His troops, which had seemed to merely be fleeing at full speed, now turned their horses around one after another with a truly splendid motion. The infantrymen did not show a trace of fatigue on their faces as they too lined up their spearheads.

"Charge!"

At Bouwen Tedos' command, the Taúlian soldiers once more started running; but this time, they were not turning their backs to the enemy nor trying to escape. Instead, they were dashing to exterminate their enemy and defend the western lands – their native country where at long last the bloodbaths of civil war had ended and the people were celebrating peace together with wine and songs.

As one was charging forward and the other turning his horse around, Orba and Bouwen caught sight of each other. Bouwen was grinning broadly, like the young warrior that he was; while Orba was indomitably galloping his horse.

Having come to this, the vigour of the Mephian troop's pursuit had evaporated and they were forced to recognise that this time, it was their turn to be hunted.

Nabarl judged that they could no longer expect help from the rear. César would have been either captured or killed.

Either way, more and more enemies were drawing up from the rear and there

was now a high chance of being caught in a pincer attack.

“Guh.”

The inside of Nabarl’s head felt pitch black. To have to give the order to “Retreat” when the capture of Taúlia was right before his eyes, when his hands had almost managed to seize glory for the Metti House, was unbearable. He felt as though if he said it, everything would be lost. Or rather, he still clung to the possibility of making Taúlia his, even now, when it was already too late.

It was a weakness of Nabarl’s that, although he had experience in warfare, he was unused to the position of commander-in-chief. On top of his lingering regrets, he was unable to bear the burden of being the sole person responsible for the defeat.

“Ah, ah, ah...”

And that was why, even as the rumble of charging horses and dragons resounded towards them, he could only gasp and flap his mouth open and shut, without being able to make a sound. However –

“Retreat, retreat!”

A mounted soldier was rushing up and shouting in a voice that carried far.

“General Nabarl, hurry! Me and César’s unit will take up for the rear guard.”

Nobody minded that it was coming from the former gladiator, Pashir. It was the same for Nabarl, who had been looking for a cue. While also shouting, “Retreat, retreat,” he forcefully turned his horse around.

While Bouwen and Orba gave chase, also on horseback, they exchanged comments.

“Shall we exterminate them?”

“No. What they’re feeling now will be enough. Once they’ve sufficiently tasted the fear of having death at their heels, we’ll let them cross the river.”

Even while he was answering, Orba did not know himself whether that was a decision made with a level head, or the sentimentality of his personal feelings.

The heat and fervour of battle were dying down.

Starting with the foot soldiers who had failed to escape in time, a great many people surrendered.

Having made sure that the enemy had galloped away, Orba and the others returned to their allies. All around them lay the corpses of horses, dragons, and people.

“Magnificent,” Bouwen continued along on horseback.

Nabarl had escaped, but Darren, who had been in command of the Belgana force, had been killed in the mêlée. Since his troops had been entrusted with capturing the city, a large number of rifles and cannons had been seized from them. There was currently a shortage of both in Taúlia.

Orba whipped the blood and human grease that clung to his sword. “You too, General.”

“Enough with the flattery. Without your analysis, Taúlia would have been swallowed whole.”

“But this was still only the first enemy force. Mephius will have been preparing a large army to use Taúlia as a base once it fell. If they don’t get discouraged by what happened to the first force, there’ll be a second and third wave of assault.”

“Hmm.”

Despite their overwhelming victory, Bouwen’s feelings had not yet relaxed. He had been seriously injured at the Coldrins and had then fought Raswan Bazgan in single combat before those wounds had fully healed. Even now, he was not really in a fit state to fight, but his eyes that gazed around at their surroundings were brimming with energy.

However, when he looked towards the direction of Apta, the hatred and hostility that should have dwelt in his eyes receded and his expression instead turned pained. It was not the way one looked at an enemy.

Noticing it, Orba asked, “Did something happen?”

“Nothing,” Bouwen blushed a little under his helmet since another person

had sensed his emotions. It showed that he was still young.

However, Bouwen Tedos soon regained his focus. For now, and until Ax returned, he would be entrusted with far more soldiers than Orba had been.

“Can I speak with you?”

As Bouwen was saying that, in the corner of his eye, Orba caught sight of something squirming into view.

From beneath a pile of corpses, a single Mephian soldier was holding a gun hidden under his own body. He had been severely wounded and was already beyond help. Aware of that himself, he suppressed the sound of his breathing and waited to the bitter end for an opportunity to kill a distinguished enemy.

Orba noticed that too. However, he deliberately turned his eyes away and allowed his horse to amble towards Bouwen and the soldiers while his hand slowly reached for the gun at his waist.

“It’s about the one who came from Apta to inform us – that messenger.”

“Ah,” Orba answered absentmindedly. “It looks like there are still people with honour left in Mephius.”

“That wasn’t a Mephian.”

He measured by eye the distance between himself and the soldier. He took a short, shallow breath.

“Then who was it?”

“The Garberan princess, Vileena Owell.”

Huh?

Orba’s breath was completely snatched away. Bouwen continued –

“The Princess did what she could to try and stop the enemy’s march, but apparently that broke down; she was on her way back to Taúlia when she met with us. But we had to hurry to immediately put the plan into practice. The Princess flew her airship alongside us but –”

At that moment, Orba pulled out his handgun. His aim was true, but he was a second too slow to pull the trigger.

Gunshots overlapped.

The Mephian soldier under the pile of corpses died from a bullet through the head, while the bullet he had fired struck Orba's mask.

Shattered fragments of iron and blood went flying.

"Orba!"

It was unclear whether he even heard Bouwen's cry. As though he had been flipped by some giant finger, Orba whirled in the air, then hit the ground.

"What?"

In the imperial court at Solon, Guhl Mephius sprang from his seat.

His clothes of finest silk flapped dully, as though to cast the shadow of death onto the courtiers waiting at the foot of the steps.

When news of Nabarl's defeat had arrived, they had been in the middle of preparing the next wave of troops. Once Taúlia had fallen, it would no longer be necessary to be careful about the west noticing anything. The intention was to select three new generals and to send a military contingent to Taúlia by way of Apta.

And now, it was said that less than a day after having started its march, the Blue Zenith Division had been routed and the commander-in-chief Nabarl had barely managed to escape alive back to Apta. "Are you saying that my proud and beloved Mephian soldiers were unable to seize Taúlia even though it was empty?"

Terrified of the Emperor's wrath, neither the messenger who had brought the news nor the surrounding nobles and military men said a word.

As though he had the eyes of a seer, Guhl Mephius turned to stare fixedly in the direction of Taúlia.

"Who is it," almost in a whisper, the Emperor asked of no one. "Who is in Taúlia? The sorcerer Zes, said to be able to summon forth a thousand soldiers from the other world? The evil dragon Nimbus, said to give birth to a child for every hundred humans eaten?"

For a while, he shook his snow-white hair and beard then he lifted the crystal-tipped staff that he had recently started carrying and, with a thud, struck the floor near the throne.

“It no longer matters. Have the whole army prepare to march. Mephius will attack Taúlia with our full might. Send out a proclamation to the entire country. This is a war of revenge for Crown Prince Gil Mephius!”

Afterword

Thanks to you all, 'Rakuin no Monshou' has reached its seventh volume.

Having arrived at the seventh volume, what should I talk about in the afterword? I kind of feel like I'm running out of anecdotes.

There's nothing interesting about an author who doesn't have even a speck of talent as a columnist talking about their private life... while thinking about it, I was organising the data on my laptop and up popped a file from more than eight years ago called 'New Ideas'.

It was probably from when my debut novel 'Requiem of Burning Sands' was almost completed, and I was wondering what to write next... a time when I had all sorts of things running through my head.

What was listed in the file ranged from detailed setups to memos with no more than one or two ideas jotted down. Among them, was one which was perfect for filling up this page... er, I mean, having discovered something which is certain to be of interest to everyone, I am happy to introduce it below.

- Shadow Kingdom (temporary title), summary:

An ordinary university student, Kajima Hiroshi (hero).

Having been dumped by his lover and failing in his studies on top of that, he embarks on a journey to relieve his heartbreak; but at the space relay station that he had gone to, he gets caught up in a terrorist attack.

In the ensuing gunfight, a man who looks identical to our hero protects him and dies in front of his eyes. He is Dewin, prince of the great Imperial Dynasty of Mevius and the man who should afterwards have been heading out for the

‘marriage of the century’.

The wedding ceremony was supposed to end a war between two great countries which had been continuing for many years. If it were cancelled right at the last minute, the military situation might become unstable again... Taking this into account, the people of the empire hatch a plan to make our hero into a temporary body-double.

Our hero is forced to take part in the wedding whether he likes it or not. But another terrorist attack breaks out during the ceremony. When it comes to light that the ringleader is a military commander from a third country, there is an outcry of public opinion in Mevius to “suppress the terrorists!”

Before he knows what is happening, our hero finds himself in the awkward position of commander-in-chief of the punitive force and is leading a huge fleet sailing towards that third country.

His fiancée, the Princess, is travelling with him on board the warship and appears to be plotting something?

And his parents seem to have put in a request for a search for a missing person... Epic battles, adventure, and romance on the wide stage of outer space!

...I’m sure you have already figured it out, but this is, so to speak, ‘Rakuin no Monshou: The Prototype.’

I did not however show it immediately to my editor and it was only later (around about when I finished ‘Holy Grail of Skulls’?) that I brought it out, by which time, the genre had changed from ‘space opera’ to ‘heroic fantasy’.

Back then, he was not impressed and it was rejected, but with time, here we are now.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, ‘Shadow Kingdom (temporary title)’ has come to life and is in your hands!

I gave you the abridged version, but in fact, I wrote a draft for the first volume of ‘Rakuin no Monshou’ which was practically a manuscript, and that first

version (also) differs somewhat from the current version.

To reveal the contents just a little, the target of Orba's revenge was a handsome young aristocrat. Who was also a former friend of his... Just how did he become an uninspiring middle-aged man like Oubary? Looking back at old files and being able to follow the changes in my own imagination is kind of fun.

Anyway, from the past to the future. Whatever the sequence of events, the story once started will continue to move forward.

As soon as this afterword is finished, it'll be time to start getting ready for the next volume.

...Just quickly, before that, there's a short story (in planning) to be published in 'Dengeki Magazine. It's (planned to be) about Orba and a certain girl during his days as a body-double. If you have the chance, please pick it up.

With that,

--Sugihara Tomonori

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ The distance an aircraft can fly before it needs to refuel.
2. ↑ 'Blue Bow' (蒼弓) and 'Blue Zenith' (蒼穹) not only look very similar, they are also pronounced the same in Japanese (soukyuu)